MAX EBERLE

ZEN POOL

AWAKEN THE MASTER WITHIN

Turbo Charged Instructional Articles, Jam Packed with Years of Hard Earned Secrets, to Help You Break Through to Higher Levels of Pool Playing Excellence.

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ZEN POOL
Awaken the Master Within

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Preface

Mahayana Buddhism is a major school of Buddhism which teaches compassion, universal salvation (everyone will become a Buddha), and enlightened wisdom.

Zen is a branch of Mahayana Buddhism which strongly emphasizes the practice of moment by moment awareness and of 'seeing deeply into the nature of things' by direct experience. Zen thinking asserts that enlightenment can be attained through meditation, self contemplation, and intuition.

Playing pool is very 'Zen' in that it does require your present moment awareness, the enlightenment that comes from the accumulation of direct experience, and the contemplation of the many nuances which are inherent in the game.

Improving at pool requires inner contemplation and the awareness of how this world is affecting the outer reality of the balls on the table.

Your willingness to change your mental and physical approach the game, or the ability not to interfere when things are going well, is at the heart of ZEN POOL.

This book is a collection of most of the instructional articles I have written over the last ten years. Most were written as an instructional staff member of Inside Pool Magazine, some for On The Wire (the West Coast pool newspaper), and the earliest ones for the TAP Pool League's monthly newsletter.

Rather than arrange the articles chronologically or by subject matter I have spread them around fairly evenly so you can find what you are looking for based on the title or just by reading the collection.

Each article has a main idea and may also contain some nuggets of information you did not expect to find. Since I have been a personal instructor for over fifteen years many of the topics were inspired by faults or problems that I have consistently seen in many of my students' games, faults that are roadblocks to better play for players everywhere.

Some of the information can help a player just by reading and thinking about it, while other information requires testing on the table and/or more disciplined work over time.

All of the diagrams are the original ones published for the articles and are my hand drawn artwork. While some of the articles may seem to be very basic, even to an intermediate player, I had to write them for those who just could not find the answer they were looking for.

And many times, even for an advanced player, it is a basic thing they have forgotten about or let slide that was causing their game to suffer. It can be surprising how one little thing, previously undetected, can help a player advance once the detail is noticed.

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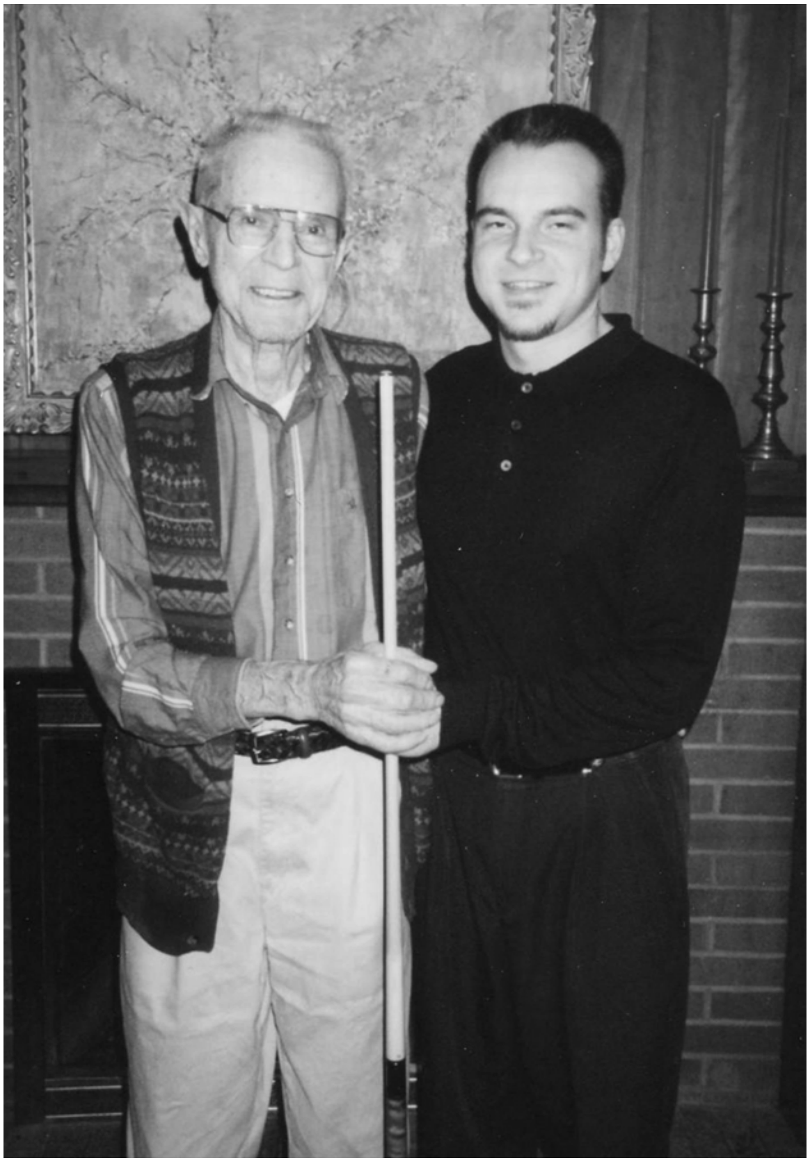
While learning is an ongoing process, I have applied the knowledge here to my own game, and it has helped me play very consistently and win many matches and tournaments.

My hope is that I have communicated clearly enough so that it helps you get what I believe you are looking for, real and lasting improvement…and more fun out of the game you love to play.



Here is my legendary pool hustling Grandfather, Charles Eberle “Pop” when he was 92 and me when I was 27 in the year 2000. This was in the living room in the house that he built in Dover, Ohio. The pool table that got me hooked on the game was in the basement.

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Introduction

The desire to become a great pool player hit me at the age of twelve. This is when I really appreciated how well my Grandfather played, and I was amazed by his ability to control the cue ball and beat everyone in town.

My Father, Uncle and cousins were good too and it was this environment that made my introduction to the game so enjoyable.

The result of the Dover, Ohio City Championships in the early eighties was my Grandfather Charles Eberle - first place, my Uncle Dave Eberle - runner-up, and my cousin Danny Eberle (Dave's son) - third place. I wanted a piece of the action, and I had people there who were willing to help.

I became a sponge of information and a machine in working on putting my new passion and knowledge into action. I *had* to master this game; there simply was no alternative that existed in my mind.

This desire and obsession attracted me to some of the best teachers and players available who kindly showed me stuff which I was eager to learn.

The strong picture in my mind of what I wanted to accomplish also got me through the rough times, when my game seemed to stagnate, or go downhill, even when I was playing more than ever. These slumps would last a few days to a couple of weeks, and I could not stand to be playing so poorly after just having played so well.

This would make me even more determined to succeed. It was during these slumps that I would always go back to the basics as I knew them, and search out better and cleaner ways of executing my shots and my form.

I would always, without fail and much to my delight, come out of these slumps playing better than I ever had before. My confidence would soar and I would improve still yet…and then another slump…and then more improvement.

This process would keep repeating itself and my game just kept better by leaps and bounds as time progressed.

In order to improve your game, all you must do is want it badly, believe it is possible, and go for it full tilt even when your results appear otherwise. You have got to be dedicated and willing to make changes that will help you in the long run.

As in any sport, developing and mastering your fundamentals is huge. Work on your fundamentals starts to become fun once you start to experience how much it really pays off.

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In depth knowledge is huge. Reading about the game and taking lessons is fun and worthwhile when you gain new insights that soon help you on the table. The process of improving itself becomes a joy as you start to really receive the benefits of your investigation and labor.

When you achieve high levels of play and experience flashes of brilliance that turn the table into your playground and the cue ball into an extension of your mind, all of that hard work and perseverance somehow seems to be worth all the effort.

One who seeks enlightenment does not complain about the hardships entailed on the journey, rather the difficulty becomes joy as he knows a prize worthy of achievement makes any trouble in attaining it miniscule by comparison.

Your Author (shooting) maybe eight years old, playing in the basement
in Dover, Ohio with older brother Stephen on the left.

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Trust (The Magic Ingredient)

After all these years of playing pool, I have determined that the most important skill in the game is trust. Sure, fundamentals and knowledge are very important, but trust is the ingredient that gives life to concentrated effort.

If you do not know much about the game and have poor fundamentals, trust will not magically make the balls and get shape for you. So you need learn more and actively learn a sound way of playing pool. You need to improve your skill.

Trust alone will not make the balls for you. You need craft, and this takes time and effort. Even if you have some good moments, you will need to keep working, keep learning and keep improving.

Trust is the final ingredient for a master of the craft. Trust is what makes a champion play their best and light up a table. Trust is what enables a master to make the game look really easy. To a master who is clicking physically and mentally, the game is easy.

Yet trust is also the first ingredient to put you on the road to mastery. If you have a goal, a vision of how good you want to be, you have got to trust you will make it there before going down that road if you intend to succeed.

With this in mind, you have got to accept and expect that you will make mistakes on the way there, but trust that if you keep trying, you will correct those mistakes and move closer to your goal…closer every day. You have got to expect improvement.

It all boils down to the shot you are facing right now. On your very next shot, make a decision. Pick a contact point. Plan a position route. Decide on what spin to use. Decide how hard to hit the shot.

And then when it is time to execute, try it and see what happens. Have desire to make it work, want it bad, and concentrate. But trust in your stroke. Put it out there. Let it go. Throw the cue. Relax. Let it happen.

Do not jump up on your shot. Do not clench the cue with a tight grip and give a half stroke. Do not try to steer the ball in the hole. Hey, if you do, you are only human, just do not do it forever. Calm down and trust your stroke.

If you have to, imitate a champion for a few minutes. Pretend you are that person. Walk like them, stroke like them, talk like them. This is actually one of the fastest ways to become great at something. Try imitating as many good players as you can. They are worthy of imitation, this will only help you.

Be an actor for a minute, and start acting like a great player. You just might become one. And if you are one, trust your stroke, trust your game.

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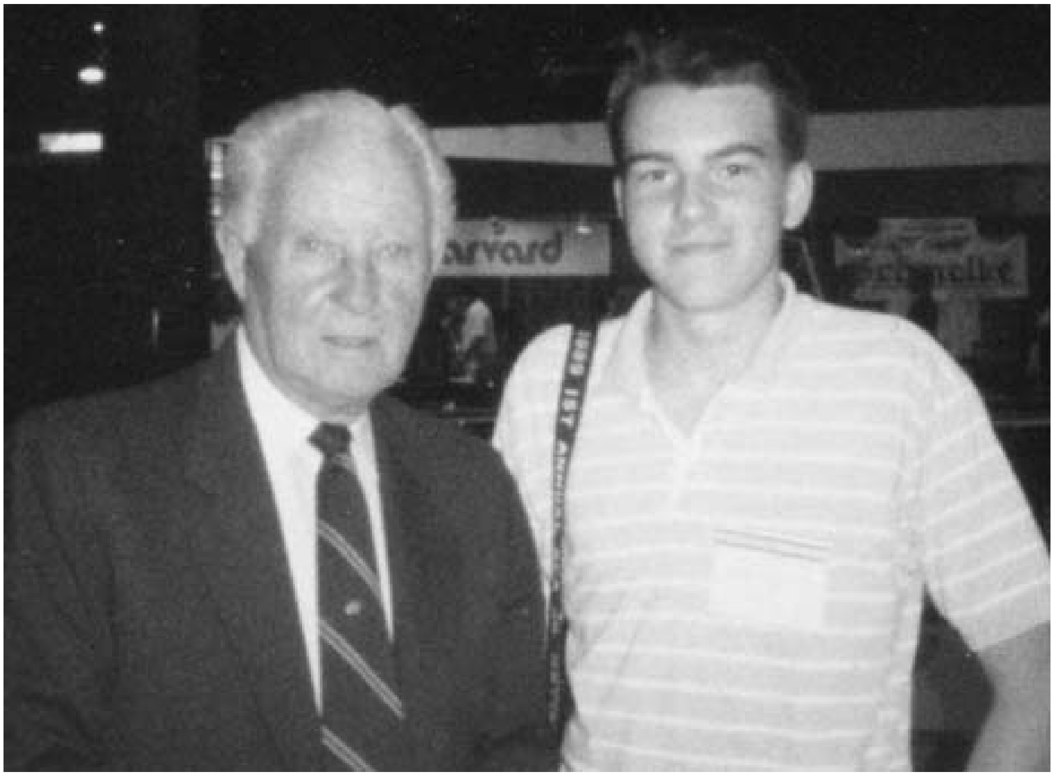
Practice by yourself on a regular basis. Each time you practice, master one shot. Keep shooting it until you have it. If you keep making a change, you will have to get it right eventually.

If you do this every day, that is a lot of shots in a year. Imagine if you mastered five shots a day. Trust the process and trust your stroke.



Here is the legend Willie Mosconi in 1989 with your 16 year old author at The BCA Trade Show and Junior National Championships, the year Chan Whitt Jr. won first place.

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Two Focuses on Each Shot

Playing pool at the top level requires that you do two things on every shot: Pocket the object ball and control the cue ball. This requires a certain amount of discipline to accomplish this goal shot after shot.

First of all, detailed mental planning is essential for you to achieve ideal results. At the very least, this means deciding where in the pocket you want the object ball to drop, and picking a small area for the cue ball to land (the smaller the better).

Once you start to acquire knowledge and skill in pocketing balls and playing position, it becomes a task to master doing both at the same time, during the same shot.

Of course, consistently pocketing balls is the first step. Beyond visual skill and talent, being able to form a stable bridge, and the aptitude to deliver a consistent stroke, keeping your body still is the major skill in the ball pocketing department.

You will see it in almost any amateur tournament, someone misses a ball while jumping up or moving their body much more than normal. Once a player masters sound fundamentals, visual skill in lining up once again becomes the most important factor.

Now, getting the cue ball to land where you want requires a lot of feel and the certainty that you will make the ball you are shooting at. If you are a precision planner, you will find that the cue ball usually only lands on your target only when you do make the ball anyway.

Accurate cue ball positioning is based on accurate object ball pocketing. You will find that you can make a ball but miss position simply because you did not make the ball in the specific part of the pocket that your position route required, or you did not "cheat" the pocket properly.

For the most part though, you can run out by just making the balls in the center of the pocket opening or "pro side of the pocket," as long as you keep nice angles on your shots.

In my previous article, "Attack the shot, then position" (page 26) I explained how you must secure the shot with your set up and then focus on touch to get position. This is true, however, at the moment your cue tip is contacting the cue ball, you must still be present fundamentally and visually to pocket the ball while you deliver your stroke. It is your internal sense that must be focused on controlling the cue ball.

A major key is to deliver your stroke like you "just know" the object ball is going in. Hitting a shot in this way will give you maximum feel for controlling the cue ball. Of course, you will "just know" the object ball is going in with a good set up, visual focus, and keeping your body still. So plan accurately, stay down, and shoot with confidence!

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Hoop Control

A very sharp student of mine recently informed me that more that two basketballs can fit in a regulation basketball hoop at the same time, and that good players actually aim for the ball to go into a certain part of the hoop depending on the situation.

Maybe I should not have been surprised, but I was, and I earned an even greater respect for higher level basketball.

This same student of mine was excited when I told him about "cheating the pocket" and demonstrated to him that more than two pool balls can fit into a pocket at the same time, which is true on most tables. Even if two balls cannot fit in, there will still be some room to work with.

"Cheating the pocket" is basically deciding what part of the pocket you want the object ball to enter, either to increase your chance at pocketing the ball or to change the cue ball's rebound angle off the object ball for playing position on the next shot. Professionals do this all the time.

Because the pockets on most pool tables are pretty wide, this can lead to a little carelessness and slight loss of accuracy in shot making. By just trying to make the ball into the pocket in general, it may bobble in a few times and even miss once in a while.

The forgivingness of the pockets may lead to carelessness. Sometimes I have caught myself playing worse on a big pocket table than I do on a tight pocket table. So what I do now is try to pretend I'm playing on a tight table and this helps me keep focused.

No matter how wide the pockets are, I like to make it a habit of picking an exact spot in the pocket as a target for the object ball. Picking this spot helps me find a clean line for the object ball and a clean contact point, which in turn helps me find a clean stroking line onto which I can balance my stance.

It is amazing how accurate you can be at hitting a certain part of the pocket, even when the object ball is several feet from the opening.

As long as there are no obstructing balls in the path, it is important that the spot I pick is in the "professional side of the pocket." The professional side of the pocket is the actual opening, as opposed to the entire visual entity of the pocket. See Diagram A. This will help you avoid hitting the rail on the way in, something that drove Willie Mosconi mad.

You will need to "Cheat the Pocket" to gain position quite often. The closer the object ball is to the pocket, the more lee way you will have to alter the angle at which the cue ball leaves, see Diagram B.

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When the object ball is close to the pocket, your chances of missing are slim, but you will still need to be accurate for the purpose of controlling the cue ball.

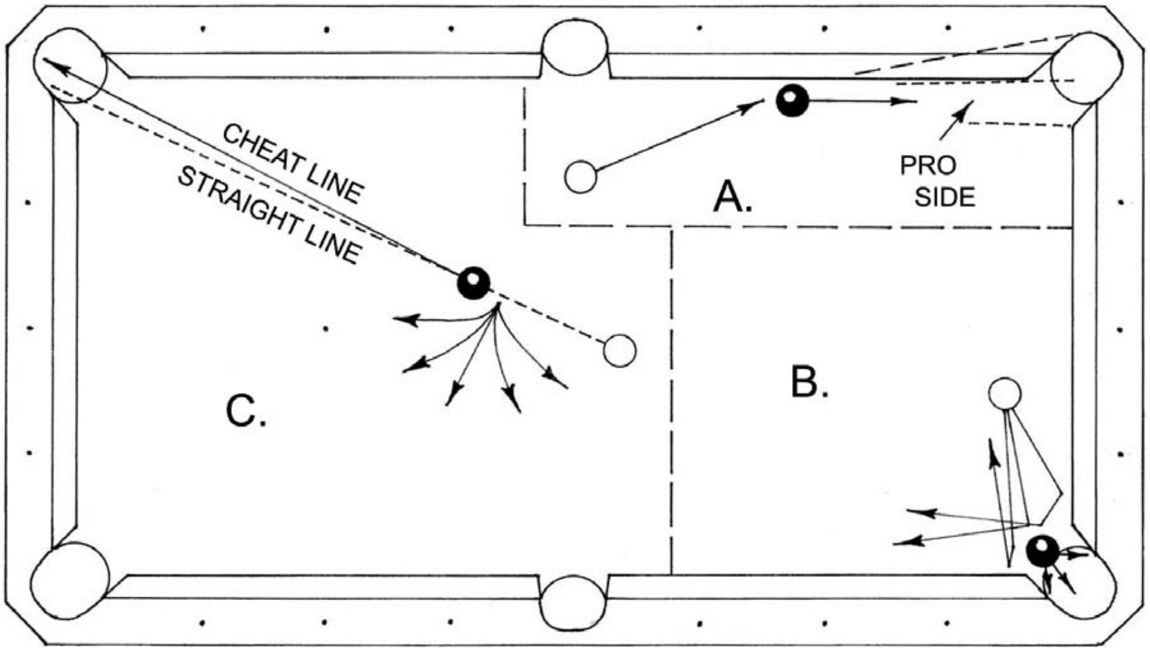
When the object ball is a couple feet or more from the pocket, and you need to cheat the pocket to create more angle for the cue ball, your chances of missing are greater.

Yet if you always make it a habit to go for an exact spot in the pocket, even when you have a perfect angle, you will have more confidence and ability in cheating the pocket at a distance when you need to, see Diagram C.

When I do have a perfect angle on a shot, the spot I pick in the pocket will be right in the middle of the professional side of the pocket. If the object ball is near the rail, my spot will be on the pocket facing.

If the ball is out in the open, my aiming spot will be in the middle or close to the middle of the pocket, on the rim of the slate.

Try practicing with pool balls on a snooker table for a few minutes if the room owner lets you. Then, when you go back to the pool table, you will see just how much room you have to play with. Have fun.



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Minimizing Chaos

A chaotic system is one that shows sensitivity to initial conditions. Any uncertainty in the initial state of the given system, no matter how small, will lead to rapidly growing errors in any effort to predict future behavior.

Basically, very small changes can result in greatly different final states in a weather system; this could mean that the flapping of a butterfly's wings in Australia may lead to the formation of a hurricane in the Caribbean; hence the "butterfly effect."

In a pool shot or "system", this could mean that a slight change in the way you address the cue ball could entirely change the outcome of the shot.

If you watch a good pool player who first started out playing snooker, you may notice that he has exceptional ball pocketing skills. This is partly because snooker requires tremendous aiming accuracy to pocket a ball; however, excellent cueing skills are equally important.

Out of necessity, world-class snooker players are not only excellent at keeping their body still, they have finely honed a skill which surely comes in handy for playing all types of pool – ACCURATELY CUEING THE CUE BALL!

In saying cueing the cue ball, I am referring to the contact point between the cue's tip and the cue ball at impact. Accurately cueing the cue ball means that the player actually hits the cue ball on the spot that he intended to strike.

If a pool shot is the result of a chaotic system, then the behavior of the balls can be predicted only if the initial conditions are known to an infinite degree of accuracy, which is, supposedly impossible. However, a pool shot does not unfold completely because the balls will eventually stop due to the friction of the cloth.

Now, imagine there was not any friction between the balls and the cloth and you had to accurately predict the exact route of a 725 rail bank shot! Can you see how minor discrepancies in where you cue the ball and the speed with which you hit it can show up way down the line?

Have no fear though, as under present conditions it is within the realm of possibility to predict and control those little colored balls with hair-raising accuracy. This does require concentration as the outcome is still very sensitive to initial conditions.

Cueing the cue ball and following through are like addressing a letter to a friend. Where you cue the cue ball will take it to the right zip code and the speed will take it to the mail box for perfect position.

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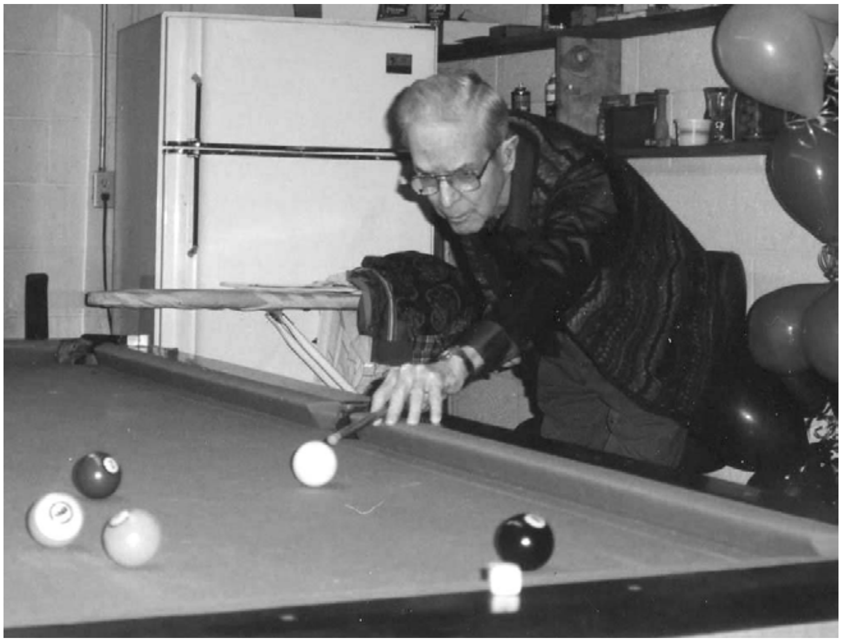
However, if you give an incorrect address, the cue ball and object ball(s) may arrive in the wrong state!

Increasing your awareness of where you are hitting the cue ball will definitely improve your position game. If you have the discipline to pay attention to this, you will also become a more consistent shot maker by learning how minute differences in spin can affect deflection and your line of stroke.

Next time you practice, try directing most of your consciousness towards cueing the cue ball. Even though you will be looking at the object ball on the last follow through, you can still be aware of the cue ball. With practice and good form it will become second nature.

One thing to try is looking at the cue ball on your final stroke once you are confident in your line of aim. This will force you to stay still and give you a new awareness of cueing the cue ball.

Also practice your center ball hit by putting the cue ball on the head spot, shooting it over the foot spot and having it rebound off the end rail so it comes straight back to hit your cue tip. This improves your awareness of center ball and thus your ability to put small increments of spin on the cue ball.



My Grandfather Charles "Pop" Eberle was still running out into his later years. When he was 83, I got him to play me a few games after he had not played in months. He picked his cue off the rack and proceeded to break and run 3 straight racks of 9-Ball on the family's 9-foot Brunswick Commander! During the Great Depression, he drove across the U.S. hustling pool to send money back home to the wife Francis and their kids.

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Lock and Load

Finding the stroking line, setting up your feet, and developing and preparing your bridge hand for each shot all require attention before your stance is complete. What about the stroking arm though, doesn't that need preparation too? Absolutely.

Your stroking arm is basically your weapon in pool and you need to prep it or position it before dropping into your stance. It is similar to a fighter positioning his arms and body right before throwing a punch.

First the feet are positioned and stabilized, then the torso is turned and the punching arm is cocked back and ready to punch. In pool the feet are set, the torso turns and the stroking arm gets locked and ready to load into the stroking line, along with the prepped bridge.

I like to teach putting your grip, wrist, elbow and shoulder all on the stroking line for the ideal alignment. This allows your stroke to swing vertically back and forth from your elbow which serves as a hinge.

Granted, as proven by the great players with sidearm or underarm strokes, a perfectly vertical alignment is not necessary, just ideal.

Those sidearm players still set up the same every time on the stroking line and have tremendous hand eye coordination and lots of practice to keep the cue in a straight line.

The side arm also serves them by keeping their stroke away from their body. This will be achieved with my recommendations plus you will have the benefits of a vertical pendulum motion with your forearm.

The stroking line is actually within a vertical plane as well, and it is in this plane where the grip, wrist, elbow and shoulder of the stroking arm reside when they are in the textbook stance.

My main point in this article is to have you try and get all these components inside the vertical stroking plane before and as you bend down into your stance. Now, by the time you are down, you know your stroking machine is already dialed into the shot.

You can actually configure your arm into a plane at any time and then place that plane right into the stroking plane. So just like making a bridge before placing it on the table, you can lock in your stroking arm before taking your stance.

In time, your whole stroking arm drops into the stroking plane as one unit ready to fire.

Eventually your form will blend into one entity with all the pieces working together in perfect unison. Until you get there each piece will take plenty of work to develop and

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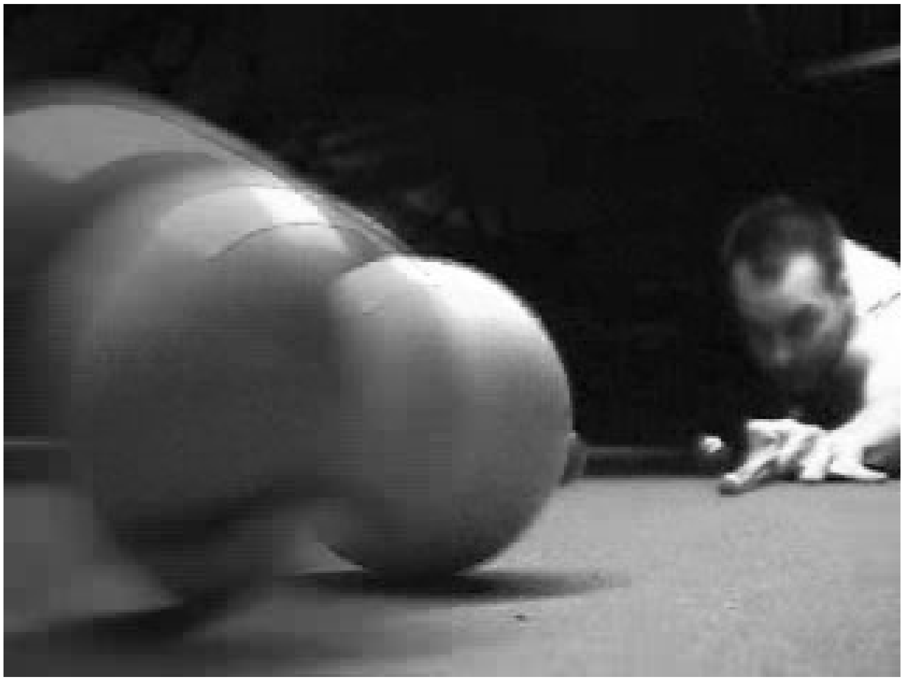
will most likely feel awkward or strange in the earliest stages. This is normal. It is like learning a language or learning to dance. You must learn the vocabulary and then how to put it all together, and with lots of practice it eventually all flows together with ease.

Now you can speak, dance, and play pool, right? Part of the fun is enjoying the learning process while knowing in your heart that you will get there with patience, persistence, and determination.



Here is your Author staying down and following through…very important!

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A Key to Consistent Shot Making

While there is no single trick to consistently pocketing balls, there are a few of them that when combined, make for a very nice equation.

One extremely important element to this equation is body positioning, or what I call lining up into the shot.

Have you ever been down on a ball ready to shoot when you suddenly had the feeling that you were not aiming on the proper line? The answer is yes, I would guess. If so, what did you do about it?

Perhaps you made a correction by pivoting your torso slightly, bending your knees differently, moving your bridge hand, leaning over, or trying to steer your cue in a better direction on your last stroke.

If you often find yourself using one or more of the above elixirs, then at least you do have the desire to pocket balls, but probably feel that life could somehow be more rewarding.

By adjusting your body once you have already assumed your stance, you are losing accuracy by hindering other important parts of the shot making equation. These include good balance, proper cueing of the ball, relaxation, ample preparation (warm up strokes, feeling, mental comfort), and a straight stroke from your center of vision to name a few.

Now, have you ever lined up on a shot feeling right – only to change your line of aim because of doubt, and then realize that you would have made it had you followed your first instinct?

Imagine if you could utilize that keen instinct on every shot. With a little cultivating, you can. You have got to develop a sense of trust that you have already positioned your body correctly on every shot.

Practice making a commitment to the line of aim that you initially determine as being correct. Trust and commitment begin while you are standing upright. It is important to be deliberate in choosing where to stand on each shot and in crouching down into the line of aim.

Basically, it is best to position your body correctly into each shot so that you can properly execute the fundamentals. If you feel like you will miss, stand up and reposition your body. Also remember to allow for spin when you are lining up your body into the shot.

Try shooting a few racks like this: On each shot put your focus on aiming and finding the angle while you are standing, and position your stance accordingly. Once you are in your stance take one back swing and shoot the shot. You may even close your eyes after that first back swing. Feel free to smile when you hear balls dropping into pockets!

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Threading the Needle

Have you ever tried to thread a needle? When you tried for the first time, did you notice that you could hold the thread steady *until* you approached the eye of the needle, and when it was almost there your hand shook and the thread missed the eye?

Attempting to pour liquid into the mouth of a very small-necked bottle may often result in the same kind of shaky muscle behavior. You can hold your hand perfectly steady, until you try to accomplish your purpose, then for some strange reason, you quiver and shake and spill the liquid.

In medical circles this is called "purpose tremor." It occurs in normal people when they try too hard, or are "too careful" not to make an error in accomplishing some purpose.

In playing pool, these purpose tremors may lead to a missed ball. It may occur in a pool player if he is being excessively careful or too anxious not to miss a shot. Excessive carefulness and anxiety both have to do with too much concern for possible failure, or doing the "wrong thing," and making too much of a conscious effort to do right.

You can avoid "dogging it" by training yourself to stop "trying" too hard or being overly careful at the moment you deliver your stroke. You must learn to trust your stroke.

Do your best to position your body into the stance with your center of vision and cue stick on the stroking line, and have keen focus on the contact point before you begin your stroke. Now, with your body perfectly still, your eyes focused on the contact point and not a thought in your mind, freely swing your arm forward in a pendulum motion.

When you are first learning your stance, it will require much work just to get aligned properly for each shot, and may feel awkward. Yet the more you practice good form, the more natural it will become and getting into your stance will also be like threading a needle.

You develop a trust that your body is lining up to what you are looking at, and with trust comes confidence. The trick is to keep your body still as you relaxingly and confidently throw the cue with your shooting arm.

So many times a dogged shot is accompanied by a sudden jarring of the body at the time of the forward stroke or a stroke that obviously deviates from its usual relaxed and straight path. Again, this often comes from being overly careful and anxious.

It may help to remind yourself to "trust your stroke" or "I'm just going to move my arm" before you get down on a shot. Also, taking deep belly breaths to ease possible tension in your torso and to get more oxygen to your brain can be helpful.

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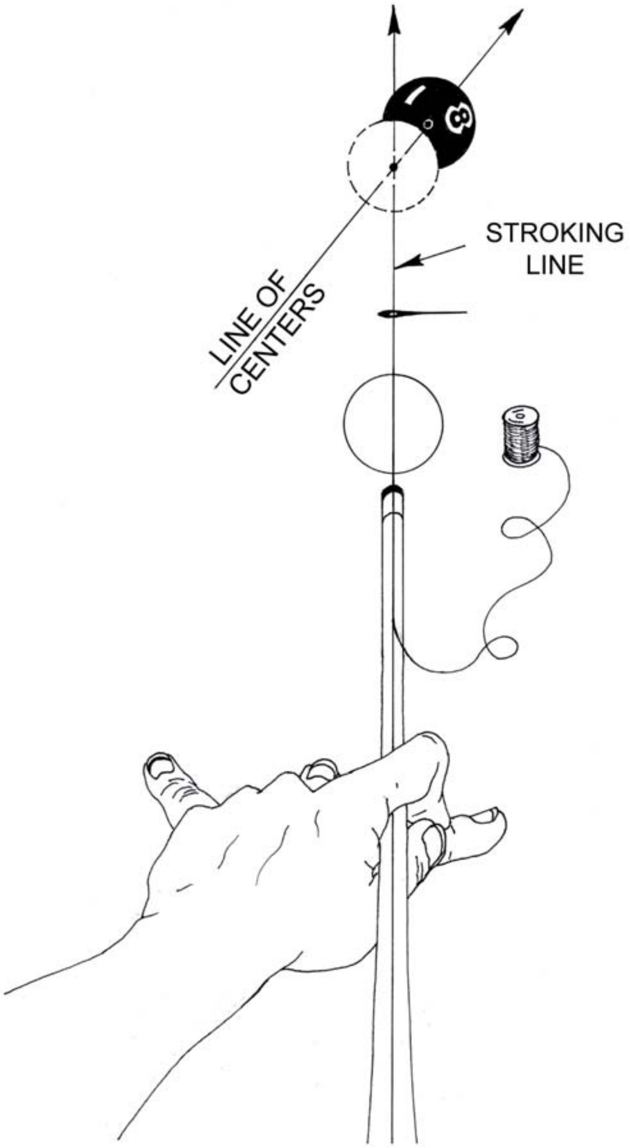
Try hitting some long straight-ins and angled shots with your body perfectly still and your eyes glued to the contact point. Then move only your arm with no concern for the outcome, just detached observation to the feeling and results of the shot.

If you have a habit of moving your body on your stroke, you may not even notice it when you do move. Even if you have someone to alert you when you do move, try to develop that body awareness so you will know without someone telling you.

Even though you will be looking at the contact point on the object ball, you must focus on keeping still as you deliver your stroke with perfect trust.

Do not "try" to stroke straight, do not "try" to make the ball. Just swing your arm forward and keep your body still and see what happens. You may discover incredible powers to make difficult shots look easy, even in pressure situations.



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Total Recall

Can you remember what it is like to be in *The Zone*? The ease with which you pocket balls and dance the cue ball into perfect position? The clarity with which you see all the right points, lines, angles and patterns? The inherent knowingness of the speed of the cloth and bounciness of the rails?

The experience of being a well balanced and oiled pool shooting machine, moving with infinite grace and delivering effortless smooth strokes that seem to fall off your backswing like so much snow falls off a leaf that can no longer carry the weight? The feeling of freedom and creativity in improvising and transcending perceived limitations?

Can you remember gliding around the table, radiant with confidence, completely absorbed in clicking colored balls over felt into pockets like a great surgeon performing intricate surgery?

When the only difference between deciding exactly where you want the cue ball and landing it there is the time in between? When the thought and the deed become one and the gap between willing and experiencing is closed? This, my friend, is *The Zone*. This is mastery.

The Zone can be reached by you in your basement or in the U.S. Open finals on television in front of millions of people. Wherever you are, it feels great, and fills you with a euphoric peacefulness that lifts you to a higher state of consciousness and increases your present moment awareness.

That's what it's all about, and when lots of people are watching, they get to go along for the ride. This is one reason Tiger Woods has such a tremendous following – through his concentration and mastery, fans are captivated and hopefully reminded of their own potential for mastery.

Sometimes *The Zone* can be elusive. Distractions in the form of thoughts or external stimuli can dilute our concentration and prevent us from finding that fanciful place. Do not, however, abandon ship just because the wind has disappeared. Keep your oars in the water and before you know it a powerful gust will come along to fill your sails.

Many times have I been playing awfully only to be persistent and find myself in The Zone. Get focused, maybe you just needed to warm up.

If you want to be in *The Zone*, call it forth. Whatever your level you have surely had "on" moments, and with good practice, they only get better and more frequent.

Recall what it feels like, how you were moving, what you were thinking, what your eyes were doing, everything about it. Just pretend you are there and soon enough you will remember; you will be there.

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Bridge Language

In pool, your bridge hand will determine how well you can communicate to the cue ball where it needs to go. Developing your stroke is also important, but now we will focus on the bridge hand, that device which guides the stroke and helps keep it on line.

Some people simply have more dexterity than others and quickly learn to form sound and solid open and closed hand bridges. For others, making a sound bridge comes in varying degrees of difficulty and the time spent in developing the bridge hand is especially well worth it.

All of our hands are unique, and if you do not have the bendy double-jointed fingers of many of the pros, just try to maximize the potential that your fingers give you. If you simply cannot make a good closed hand bridge no matter how hard you try, you can still be effective with a good open hand bridge.

Think of someone fluent in sign language. They easily change from one distinct symbol to the next as they communicate. When they transform from one symbol to the next, do they fidget with their fingers for a while as they form the next symbol? Not if they are fluent.

That is the idea with pool. It is ideal to be able to smoothly and easily lock your bridge hand into the chosen form for the present shot. Many top players will even form their bridge in the air and finalize it by squishing it onto the table and thus lock it in place right away.

Locking your bridge in ASAP will enable you to focus on your stroke and speed control instead of diverting your attention between getting your bridge hand ready and preparing your stroke. This is chasing two birds with one stone if you will.

My friends tease me for forming bridge hand all the time when I am away from the table. I used to do this in school and use my pencil as a pool cue while perfecting my bridges. So this is one way to practice and improve your game, work on your bridge while driving (keep one hand on the wheel please), watching TV, etc... Because there are many bridges in pool, you can work on any of them at any time.

What can I say, I am a pool nut. Like my fellow pro player Tang Hoa once told me, “You’ve got to be a little crazy to get good at pool, know what I mean?”

Try not to keep moving your bridge fingers around once you are in your stance. Learn to get them into place right away and put enough pressure into the table to keep them locked there even and especially on your final delivery.

The more fluent you become with your bridge hand, the more accurate and consistent you will also become.

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Come Back Strong

It would be nice to jump out to an early lead and cruise to an easy win in every match you play. Everything goes your way while your confidence soars and you play perfect pool, cruising with your beautiful performance to another textbook win. The perfect pool dream situation every time you step up to play.

While this would be nice and sometimes does happen, the reality is that it does not always happen, and if you are unprepared for something less than your great expectations, your performance and your winning percentage will surely drop.

Sometimes it is adversity that pushes us to peak performance and to realize this is a blessed thing in this game.

So often, without wrongdoing on your part, you can and will find your self trailing in a match to varying degrees. And sometimes one or two little errors or bad rolls will put you behind in a match. Or maybe all the rolls went against you and you played miserably. The point is that there are countless ways to fall behind, and the more tournaments you play, the more of these ways you will experience.

So while you must try hard to make things go your way, you must be prepared for when they do not and have the necessary mental and physical ammunition by your side to turn things around. For one, many players lose their edge once they have you down because they get comfortable and start to take winning for granted. Then when you fire back, they are caught off guard and falter. The heat is on them when you start coming back. Knowing this should be enough to make you keep bearing down.

Also realize that if they do not win any more games, they cannot win. Come up with the score you must beat them by from that point to win. If they are up 6-2 in a race to 9, then you have to beat them at least 7-2 from there out. That gives you a goal and a positive mind frame.

Nick Varner, the most legendary come-from-behind player of all time told me, “I just always like to try one hundred percent on every shot.” Thanks Nick, that thought has won me countless matches. I almost feel like I’m in the favorite even if I’m trailing.

So do not bitch, whine, complain, or feel sorry for yourself if things do not look great – get out there and play, try your best, give 100%. Many times that is the only way out, and many times you will make it out!

Physically keep a winning posture and keep breathing deeply from your belly. This will keep oxygen in your brain, and the winning posture will give you and your opponent the message that you are a champion and will not go away! It’s never over until the last ball drops.

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Cue Ball Compass

In all pool games, accurate direction control is essential for playing great position. While speed is also crucial, first you must get the cue ball traveling towards your target. With a nice medium angle, you can pretty much get the cue ball to go anywhere you want on the table.

Sometimes you can get away with being a little less accurate with direction control because the position zone is so big, but other times being off by one degree can mess up a run.

As a rule, I'm always going for an exact line with my cue ball. Even if I don't get the ball perfectly on that line, it will be closer than if I did not pick that line.

The same goes for position play. I'm always trying to land the cue ball on an exact spot. By choosing an exact spot for my cue ball to land, it enables me to choose an exact direction for the cue ball to get there.

Practicing your direction control will be very beneficial to your game. Just choose a shot and keep setting it up exactly the same every time but work on getting the cue ball to travel on a different line after it pockets the ball.

Once you get the cue ball to go on your desired line, just pick a new line to work on.

The diamonds are good to use as targets. When you get good at hitting all the diamonds, your brain will fill in the rest and you will be able to hit any intermediate target line you choose during a game.

I would also recommend combining speed control with this drill just to keep you in the habit of hitting each shot with an intended speed. Practice like this will pay huge dividends.

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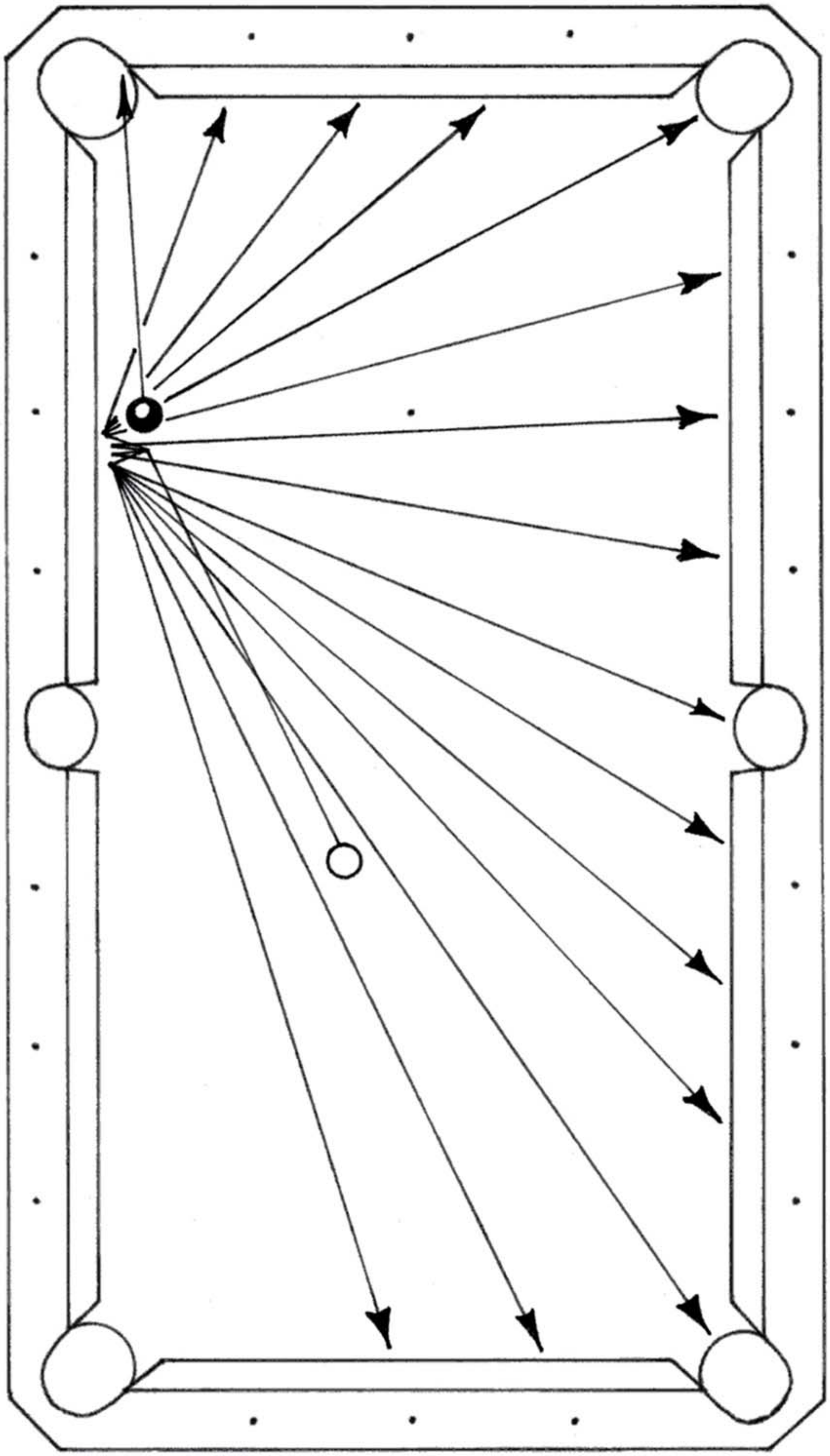

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Need for Speed

My philosophy on playing position is that if you always go for an exact target on the table (the size of a dime to a cue ball), you will be in line much more often than not, and when the time comes when you have to play tight position, you will be ready.

By going for an exact target, you will also improve very fast because on every shot you are learning a nuance about cue ball control, even when you don't land on your chosen spot.

Each "unsuccessful" attempt is showing you a way not to shoot the shot, thus increasing your knowledge and skill. So be encouraged if you miss the target, you are getting better!

In my last article, Cue ball Compass, I discussed the importance of direction control in position play. The other half of the equation is SPEED CONTROL. Now that you can get the cue ball to go in the right direction, you need to make it land at your desired distance.

When you play position towards or away from the object ball (on the line of position), speed control is not quite as urgent as when you are crossing the line of position.

Yet even when you are playing position along the line of position, if you go for a spot on that line, you will be able to get good shape when you do cross the line because your speed control is honed from always picking a spot on the line.

I think developing excellent speed control is a matter of setting high standards for your position play and working to hone your touch. If you have the discipline to pick the spot for the cue ball, even on easy shots where the position zone is large, your game will advance by leaps and bounds.

I recommend setting up a shot, picking a target for the cue ball, and shooting it until you land exactly on that spot. Just by successfully executing this one shot, your speed control will improve for all the other shots on the table. Set up as many position scenarios to work on as you like, it will only help.

I also like to work on both my follow and draw speeds by mastering several different distances. As with working on direction control, your brain will fill in the gaps and you will soon be able to hit any intermediate target you wish, or at least get close enough for great shape.

Just feel the speed and trust that you will land the cue ball on your target.

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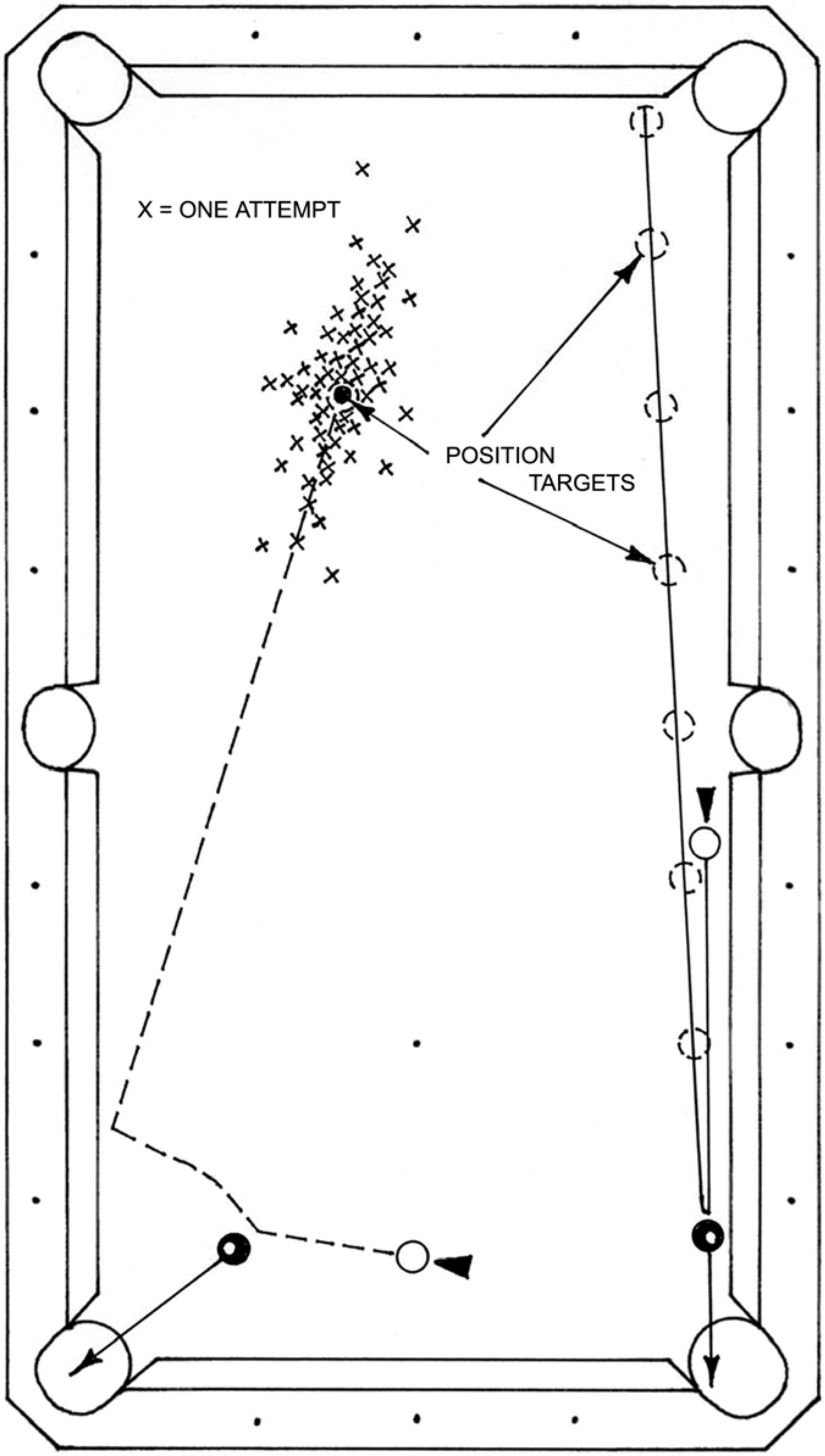

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Attack the Shot…And Then Position

Most successful pool shots consist of two parts; pocketing the object ball and positioning the cue ball. These two facets of each shot are so interrelated that it is hard to say one is more important than the other.

Of course, if you don't pocket the ball, position will not do you much good. And if you don't play position, you will probably run out of amazing shots. Yet if you follow this advice you may find yourself pocketing more balls anyway, and having easier runs. Sound good?

What I mean by attacking the shot is to really focus on making the ball by setting up your stance so your cue is securely on the stroking line *before* you take your first practice stroke.

Remember, the stroking line is the line you will decide to actually throw (stroke) your cue down once you make all the necessary adjustments for speed angle and spin. It is ideal to decide on a line before you take your stance, because without this decision a proper stance and stroke are not likely to happen.

So in order to pocket the object ball, you must first know what you will be doing with the cue ball because this information could change the line you stroke down.

A major part of being secure on the stroking line is having your bridge fully formed and solid. Taking the time during your practice strokes to solidify your bridge will not only make your shot making weaker, it will also take valuable time away from prepping your stroke and getting the feel for moving the cue ball to its next location.

So get your bridge as ready as possible while you are bending down into the shot and try to snug your bridge into the table right away…with the cue on the stroking line of course.

Also be conscious of your grip hand so that while you take your stance and once you are down, the cue is right on the stroking line.

Equally or more important than your hands are your eyes. They actually come first, and should be on the stroking line while you are standing and all the way into your fully set stance. This is "hands eye coordination."

See the stroking line with your eyes and place the cue there with your hands. If this is not clean, your shots will not be clean.

So now that you have "attacked" the shot by aggressively setting up on the stroking line, you can shift your focus to feeling the speed of the shot and delivering a beautiful stroke. In my opinion, that's what the practice strokes are really for, feeling the position.

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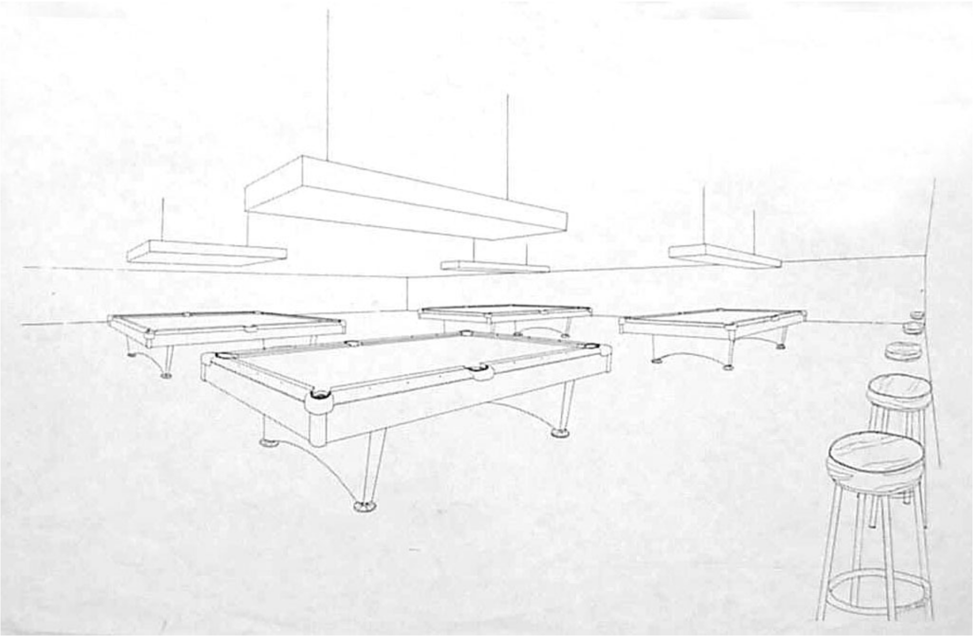
Of course you will be maintaining your aim and double checking where you will hit the cue ball, but the critical part of the shot making process has already been attacked and now you are feeling your cue ball out of a solid stance, bridge, and accurate cue ball/object ball collision.

First secure the shot by making a stance that is on line and solid before the first practice stroke, and then maintain it during your practice strokes and final stroke while you attack the exact position you desire.



A two point perspective drawing by the Author while in High School in Virginia.

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Making Combinations

How many times have you heard another pool player say "I hate combinations!"? I've heard it a million times and even from some true champions. This just shows how difficult combos can be, even for a good player.

Of course the difficulty level of combination shots varies greatly, but there are some things you can do to increase your success rate and you'll be surprised at just how many tough combos you will end up making.

Most of the time, it is wise to avoid most combos unless they lay easy or seem to be your only option. Having the control to work around combos is great, yet eventually you will need to make one and it is better to shoot it with confidence.

The first step for success, as usual, is mental. Learn to get rid of the "I hate combinations" attitude and dreadful self talk. Enter into the deal with positive anticipation and even tell yourself something like "I love making combinations!" Trust me, a positive attitude like this will at minimum double your combo success rate immediately! Condition yourself to think how much you enjoy making combos.

The accuracy required for making a combo means that you should take extra care in studying the shot and finding the contact points. Making a combination is very similar to making one object ball into a very small pocket.

While aim is important, I don't think the trick to making combos is in a special aiming technique, rather it is in using your technique well and in being decisive and accurate in your delivery. Once you figure out your exact contact point and stroking line, you will need to zero in on it pretty quickly before it disappears to your eyes.

With a positive mind frame, your first step is to find the contact point on the ball you want to pocket. Do this carefully and pick a spot in the middle of the opening (pro side of the pocket). Now line up behind the ball you will be striking, and carefully figure out where you need to hit this one with the cue ball.

It is at this stage that I recommend you get your grip arm into alignment and at the angle to your body that it will be at during your shot. This will save you valuable seconds and enable you to better lock in on the stroking line and contact point while they are fresh in your sights.

Prepping your stroking arm will also give you much needed confidence as you head to the final stage of making the combo.

Everything you need to do well for shot making, you need to do better for making combos, ha-ha! It is important that you be decisive as you line up into your stance. There is no room for wiggling around to get comfortable and find your aim. Aim should

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be neat and tidy, and you should decisively set your stance and get ready to confidently deliver your stroke. Because your aiming and preparation was so good, now all you have to do is stroke your cue down the groove that you have set yourself on.

Focus on a straight, smooth backswing and a straight smooth follow through…that's it. Do not think about making a combo and do not jump up and try to steer the shot. Trust your process and focus on a clean delivery.

One great aiming technique for combos is using two ghost balls, one for the object ball to be pocketed and the other for the object ball you will be striking with the cue ball. Depending on how good you are at visualizing ghost balls, this will put you right where you need to be to make the combo, now just trust it and fire away!

I like to take this one step further and see the two ghost spots (the spots on the table where the ghost balls are resting). The ghost spot on the ball to be pocketed helps me find the ghost spot for the middle ball which I then use for my stroking line. This is so good that I really should not be telling you this, haha!

Your author stalks a game winning combination at Hollywood Billiards in Los Angeles, California. (Photo: courtesy of Charles Pinkett.)

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Feel the Force

A good friend of mine at Hollywood Billiards recently asked me for some help with his pool game. After watching him closely for five minutes, I could see that he was tensing and kind of jumping up a bit on many of his shots.

In addition, he was turning his stroke to either side as if trying to steer the ball into the hole.

I came up with a suggestion. I told him to line up for his shot, take a couple practice strokes, and to close his eyes right before and during his shot. That's right, I told him to close his eyes. He looked at me kind of funny but decided to give it a try.

He missed the first shot or two, but then he started making just about everything he shot at, even long angled shots. Now he looked at me as if to say "WOW, unbelievable, I just made those shots with my eyes closed!" Even I was impressed with the shots he was making.

There are a few lessons to the story. One is - if you can just learn to stay out of your own way, you will be surprised at how accurate you really are. By jumping up or fidgeting on your delivery stroke, you are destroying the setup and aim you worked so hard to build.

Second – Shooting with your eyes closed proves just how important setting up is to your shot. If you do it well, you can literally shoot with your eyes closed!

Third – if you work on your stroke, you can deliver it with your sense of feel and "muscle memory" once you get it lined up to your target. Closing your eyes will put your focus completely on what *you* are doing, not on whether you are worried about the ball going in or not.

When my friend closed his eyes, he no longer jumped or turned his cue during the stroke. It may take him a little time to bring that same calm in to his open-eyed game, but with some work he will do it.

While you practice with your eyes closed, pay attention to how your body feels during your shots and what parts move. Then, when you open your eyes again, remember the feeling and shoot as if your eyes are closed.

Practice a little with your eyes closed everyday for a week. This will improve your stance setup, help you keep your head and body still, and improve your feel for the game. Have fun practicing and may the FORCE be with you!

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From the Ground Up

As in any other active sport, playing pool requires the coordination of the entire body. While on most shots only the shooting arm moves, every part of the body is first placed in a specific location to allow the player to deliver an effective stroke for each shot.

While it may seem obvious, the feet must be placed correctly first in order for everything else to fall into place. While most of the action is on the table, it is the feet (or the wheels for the wheelchair players) that set up the action in the first place and stabilize it during the practice strokes and final delivery.

Just by watching closely, you will notice a multitude of foot positions assumed by different players. Each player develops or falls into a consistent way of positioning their feet for almost every shot.

I have noticed that beginners struggling with pool struggle to varying degrees with getting their feet set. They may line up initially only to shuffle their feet around once they are down there in search of being ready to shoot.

This harkens back to last month's article about finding the stroking line before getting down in your stance. The first reason why finding the stroking line before getting into the stance is so important, is because your foot positioning is determined by the location of the stroking line. And it is your feet that will set up the rest of your stance.

The more attention you pay to your foot positioning, the more success you will have on the pool table. Great players in all cue sports have put considerable time and effort into perfecting their foot positioning. They have worked hard for something that they now make look so easy and effortless. And sometimes even great players will work hard to reconfigure their foot positioning if they think it will take them to a higher level.

As proven by the fact that different champions have slightly different foot positions, there is no one "correct" position for your feet, but effective foot positioning will have attributes in common such as: Allowing you to be *well balanced* in your stance, allowing your stroking arm to be *free from the interference of your torso*, and providing you with *stability* for your stroke.

My basic recommendations for accomplishing these three objectives are; put the center of your back foot directly under your cue and on the stroking line and your front foot away from the stroking line in the 30-60 degree angle range pointed more forward than the back foot and slightly more than shoulder width apart from your back foot (see diagram).

Foot positioning on specialty shots such as the break and jack up shots may be slightly different but they will still produce the three elements of balance, freedom and stability.

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You may often see a good player *first set his or her feet*, continue to stand upright for a moment, and then bend down to place their bridge hand on the table to complete the stance (this is what I want you to try).

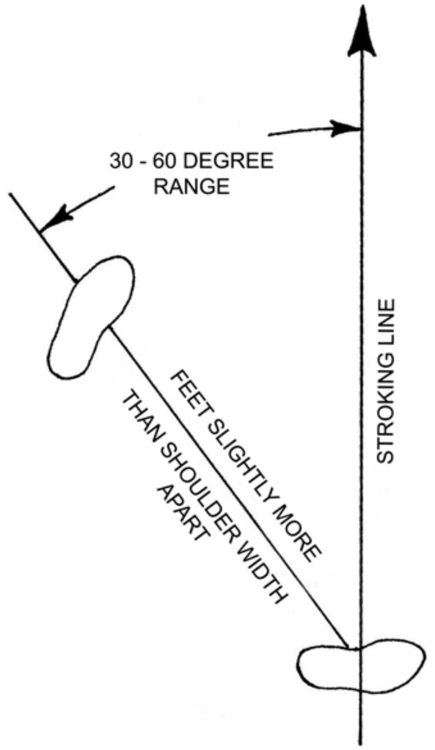
They may even bring their bridge and body partially or all the way back up for fine tuning, but while keeping their feet in place. Or they may stand up and reposition their feet again until they are comfortable.

When a player is playing sharp and confidently, usually you will not see them readjust their upper bodies after their feet are set. Yet go ahead and do this if you need to in order to be comfortable.

While I like to teach that a great pool stance is a solid tripod created by your two feet (legs) and your bridge hand (arm), I think the existence of great one-handed players proves that it can be done with a bipod (just your feet & legs) and that the feet are of paramount importance.

While it is fair to say that the greatest one-handed player will probably never consistently beat the greatest two-handed player, I have heard incredible stories about what one handed players (not using a bridge hand) have accomplished.

If you practice getting your feet set before bending down to place your bridge hand, you will find yourself playing more consistently and reaching higher levels of play all the time. Enjoy the fruits of balance, freedom and stability.



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Tangent Time

You know about the tangent line, right? For those of you who do not, it is the line perpendicular to the line that the object ball will travel down and into the pocket. This tangent line is on the contact point and leaves at a right angle from the collision.

The cue ball will travel along this line after impact and stay on this line, if it came in from an angle, and assuming there is no top or bottom spin on the cue ball. This knowledge is paramount in controlling the cue ball, so how will it help you to pocket your object ball?

This harkens back to a previous article on body positioning. It is to your advantage to position your eyes and cue stick correctly onto the line of stroke from the standing position, in order to obtain accuracy and consistency.

- Now, LOOK at the line from the object ball to the pocket.
- Next, assuming there is an angle, imagine the tangent line coming off of the object ball from the contact point.
- Now, with this right angle, or L in mind, bend into the shot with the goal of caroming the cue ball off of the object ball and down that tangent line.
- If you can do this, the object ball will automatically drop.

You can extend this line to a rail and try to hit that spot, or you can extend it beyond the table to the wall or something, and go for that.

Doing this will open your mind to the entire geometry of the shot. For a moment, taking away your focus from making the object ball and putting your focus on making the cue ball travel down the tangent line may help you deliver a smoother more relaxed stroke. This method may greatly increase your feeling for the game of pool!

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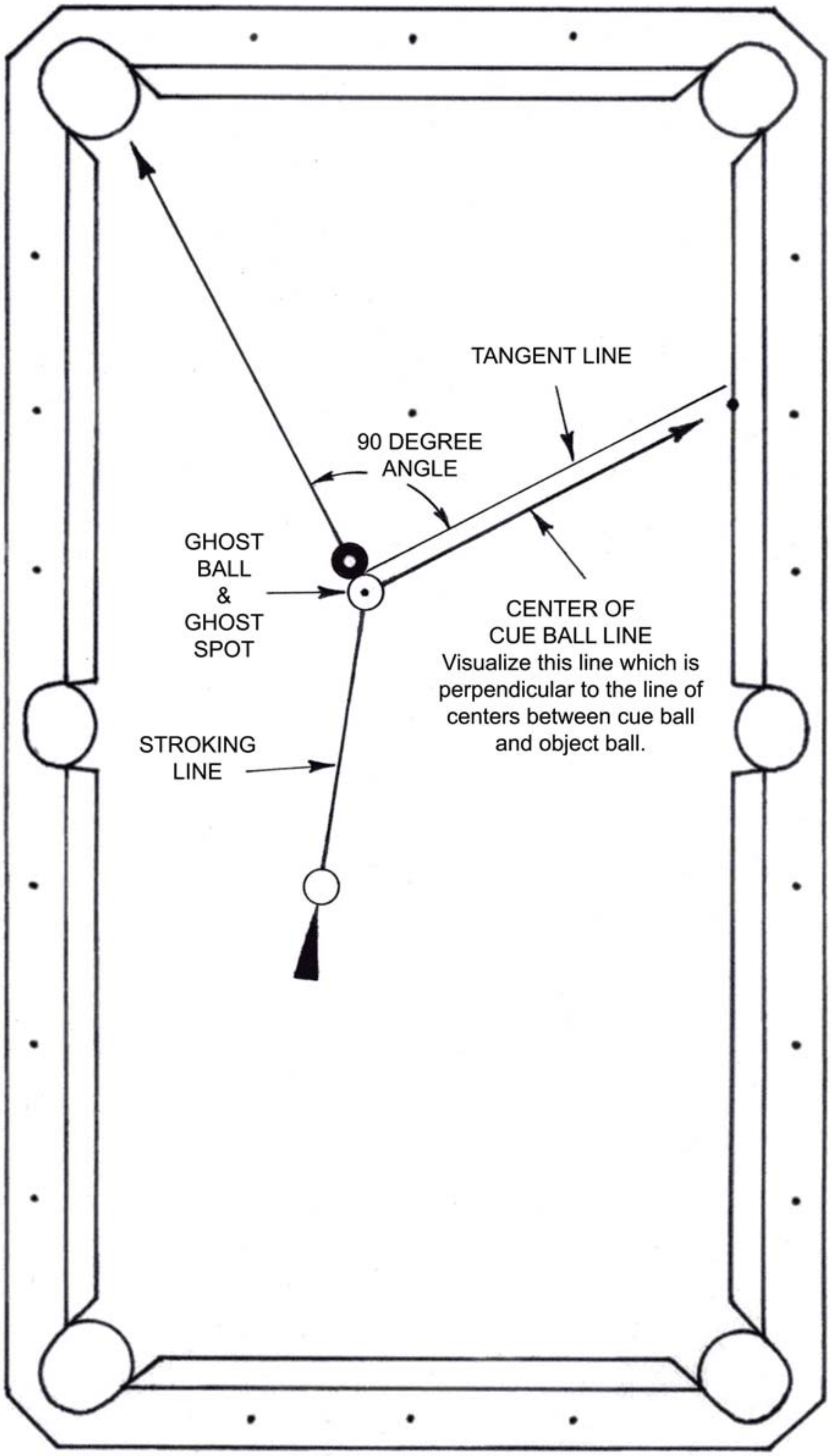

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Keeping Your Composure

Webster's Dictionary states that composure implies the controlling of emotional or mental agitation by an effort of will or as a matter of habit.

- Composure is the ability to remain calm and focused enough to perform up to your capabilities.
- Composure is to consistently respond to stressful situations with empowering thoughts, feelings and actions.
- Composure is letting go of past mistakes and breathing out anxieties about the future.
- Composure is laughing in the face of seemingly gargantuan pressure and concentrating on the task at hand.

Why would you want to have composure? Maybe you want to make great comebacks, or just play your game against a top player; be a champion; or impress a potential significant other (show off). Whatever your reason, composure is a good place to start when you are striving for positive results.

It is similar to approaching life from a well balanced center. If you do your best to keep balanced, you will have a better chance at staying afloat if something rocks your boat.

Gaining composure could mean changing the way you think about certain aspects of the game. I am sure you know a few players who go berserk every time their opponent gets a good roll. The more bad rolls they get, the more they freak out and start announcing to the world that you are lucky. Meanwhile, they are stuck in the past with a dark storm cloud growing over their head.

Granted, there is too much luck in nine ball, but until the rules are changed to call all shots and safeties, it is necessary to understand that ROLLS HAPPEN and you should be happy to BE AT THE TABLE. If you find yourself on the short end of the rolls during a match, just think to yourself "things will turn my way", and do the best with what you have.

For example, what if you were on the hill with a seven game lead and your opponent comes back to tie the match. You could be in shell shock and flub a possible chance at a win, or you could understand that many matches are close anyway and all you have to do is concentrate on each shot in this final game.

When you have a big lead it is especially important to bear down even more and realize that if you go to sleep you have no chance at winning, no lead is a safe lead.

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The same thing applies when you are coming from behind. No lead is insurmountable. Just think "I'll hold him there and then pass him." It is amazing to see what happens when you are unflappable. The more you understand match dynamics, the less likely you will be taken by surprise, and the more you will be giving the surprise.

Composure has a lot to do with knowing and remembering the truth about yourself and any given situation. Whether the heat is on or off, it is good to remember what you are capable of (physically, mentally, and spiritually) and let this give you confidence. Letting go of fears and doubts is one of the main challenges every pool player or and person in life for that matter must face.

The illusions of fear and doubt have no power unless you have allowed them the power. Once you learn to recognize illusions, it will be easier to get rid of them.

If the truth is that you play at a certain level, then you want to do your best to prevent anything from interfering. Often blockages are very subtle and it would be wise to take a deep honest look into the causes. Once you have targeted any interference, it is necessary to actively and willfully diminish it by turning its positive counterpart into a habit. Sometimes habits die hard, but in the business of uncovering the truth it will be worth it.

If you are often too tense, learn to relax. If you are doubtful, learn to generate feelings of courage and confidence. If you have trouble concentrating, turn pool into a study on concentrating. Whatever the malady, there is a remedy, and a little discipline can go a long way.

Not enough can be said about the benefits of preparation. Before a big match, tell yourself that this will take everything you have and that you must go deep to your basic core where your strength lies. If perhaps you have never beaten this player, tell yourself "that was then…this is NOW", or "I am due for a win."

Michael Jordan says that before he shoots a big foul shot, instead of thinking about the millions of people watching and everything at stake, he puts himself in a familiar place like his old high school gym where he feels comfortable.

Being physically and spiritually fit are also great bonuses. The link between your body language and your mental/emotional states is amazingly close. It is good to work just as hard on your composure (mental game) as you do on your physical skills.

Talk to experienced players and champions about this and read plenty of books like "Pleasures of Small Motions" by Bob Fancher, Phd., "Golf is not a Game of Perfect" by Bob Rotella, "The Inner Game of Tennis" by Timothy Gallway, and "Conversations with God" by Neale Donald Walsh.

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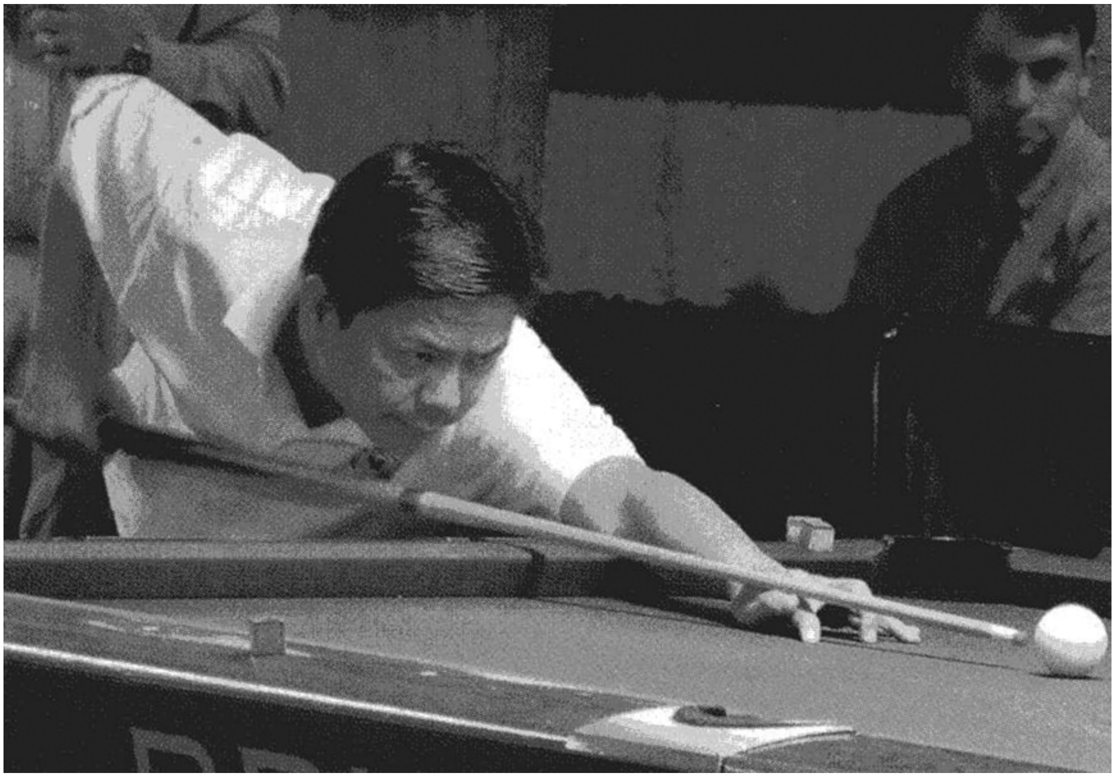

Jose Parica, one of the greatest players of all time. Jose has a famous ability to be relaxed and concentrate at the same time. Jose was a Golden Gloves Boxer in his youth. (Photo courtesy of JR Calvert, www.jrcalvert.com)

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Calm Your Nerves with Fun

I think we have all been there…played below our capability in a match because we were anxious, tight, or nervous for whatever reason. It is easy to make a huge deal out of a match even if it really does not mean much.

And it is easy to place all our focus on the outcome or anticipated outcome before it even happens. These thoughts about winning and losing, the other player, the crowd – all take away focus and hinder a relaxed state that is ideal for us to perform at our best.

Did you fall in love with pool because it gave you a chance to win at something? Or did you fall in love with pool because it is simply interesting and fun? Probably because it was so fun, right? And do you play your best when you are relaxed or when you are tense? I'm guessing when you are relaxed.

I think having fun helps you to relax. Your heart rate is slower and your confidence often is higher. If you can have fun and concentrate, your stroke will be smooth and you will stay down on the ball better.

Next time you are nervous, tight, or worried before a match, remember you are about to go play some pool. It is not some test you must pass in order to preserve your life…it is a game of pool.

Remind yourself of this before the match. Accept your nervous feelings and tell yourself that you will be getting calmer and calmer. Settle down. Really focus on setting your stance up where it needs to be, so you can have a relaxed stroke and focus on the speed control.

If you are sloppy with your setup and stance, you will be more likely to jump up when it is time to shoot. It is hard to control the cue ball if you don't feel the object ball will be dropping. While you don't want to have a sloppy setup, you also do not want to be too tight in your setup. Relaxed concentration is the key. You are relaxed and focused when you are in the zone.

Relax in between shots, too. Don't be so worried. Walk around like you know what you are doing. Look at Jose Parica in between his shots. It looks like he is taking a stroll in the park.

So many times the first game or two can set the emotional tone for the rest of the match. Many times your nerves will be calmed if you can do well in the beginning. Do not let your guard down, though, if things start out well, because one mistake in this sport can cost the whole match.

So keep concentrating, one shot at a time. Relax, and remember to have fun!

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Allowing for Deflection

One of the most time consuming things to master in pool is how to adjust your aim when using sidespin. While throw may exist between the cue ball and object ball, deflection has a much bigger impact on your aim for most shots.

My definition of deflection is: “When using left or right English, the tendency of the cue ball to deviate from the stroking line to the opposite side of that which you strike the cue ball. In addition, deflection increases with an increase in speed of stroke and with an increase in amount of sidespin.”

With this definition in mind, making a pool ball while using side spin is no easy chore. Without this awareness, a player can never advance to the highest levels of play.

So, when and how much do you compensate your aim for the side spin you plan to use? The answer to the first question, when, is while you are standing before setting up your stance.

Since allowing for deflection will create a stroking line other that that of a center ball or vertical axis hit, you must decide on this line before getting down so you can create a stance that is balanced and aligned on this new stroking line.

The answer to how, is a bit more complicated. First of all, since you will be using sidespin, you will want to line your center of vision up through the side of the cue ball you will be striking.

Instead of simply stroking on a parallel line to that of a perfect center ball hit, you will have to pivot this stroking line away from the center ball hit line in the direction of the side you will be striking the cue ball (remember to do this while standing so you can get balanced on this line in your stance).

If there were no such thing as deflection, you could always stroke on a line parallel to the center ball hit stroking line.

The less deflection a cue has, the less you will have to pivot your stroking line to make the shot.

Determining how much to pivot this stoking line requires experimental, repetitious and methodical practice for however long it takes to “get it.” Good old fashioned blood, sweat and tears.

I suggest setting up the exact same shot over and over. Hit the shot with the same spin and speed while only adjusting your line of aim. By keeping the other variables the same you will quickly learn how much to pivot on that particular shot.

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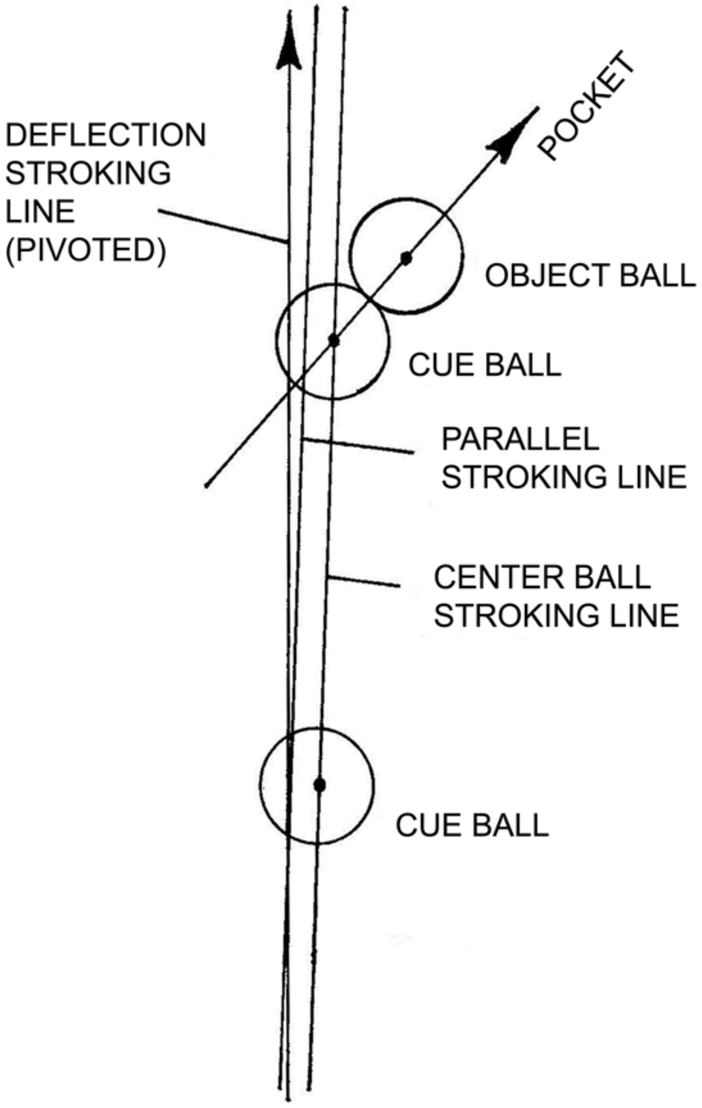
Then see what happens when you keep your spin and aim the same but change your speed. Then keep your speed and aim the same while adjusting your spin.

Closely observe your results every shot so you can learn what is happening. You can experiment like this with any shot you want to master. Remember to stay down and follow through every shot, you will improve much faster like this.

Practice like a scientist, detached from the results yet very observant so you can make the proper adjustments. With concentrated effort you will see great improvement.



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Long and Straight

Most pro caliber players have a stroke on which they can rely. When they concentrate on a target and set up their stance, they are confident in delivering the cue ball on the path it needs to travel for success.

I like to compare the stroke and stance (including the bridge hand) to a large machine gun on a tripod. The machine gun will not be too effective if the tripod is wobbly or off balance and the tripod will not help much if the machine gun is not too powerful or does not shoot too straight.

As you develop your stance into a solid entity that stays solid even during the delivery of your final stroke, you will now have the opportunity to really create a straight and dependable stroke.

Perhaps the best way to create a straight stroke is to repeatedly shoot long straight in shots. Using a rail bridge, I like to set the cue ball about 8-15 inches off the end rail and put the object ball about one diamond on the other side of the side pocket. Make sure they are lined perfectly straight into the far pocket when lining them up.

To get any lasting benefit from the drill you should do it for fifteen minutes minimum every day for two weeks. Once you get good at it, just a rack or two of fifteen balls a day to keep sharp is good…whatever it takes.

When doing this drill, you really want to isolate your stroke as much as possible. This means to separate your stroke from your body. You will need to pay attention to your body as you do this, feeling for any unnecessary movements during your stroke. If you tend to move your body (head included), the pain of missing should train you to keep still.

You really need to try and give freedom to your stroking arm. With each ball you shoot, your stance should become more and more still. Eventually, you need to feel this on your own, without the watchful eye of someone else.

Basically, you want to make the shot and stop the cue ball. Stroking this shot really hard will help you develop a great stroke.

Any slight errors you commit will be compounded when hitting hard. The cue ball will deflect more with accidental sidespin and the pocket will be more likely to jaw the object ball. This will put a premium on your precise delivery.

Focus on a nice, slow, smooth backswing pulling straight back from the object ball and then throw (without letting go) the cue stick right towards the object ball.

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You can also look at the center of the cue ball during your stroke, as that will produce good results too if you are lined up well.

Try to have the attitude of detachment from the outcome of the shot and just focus on your stroke. This will help your body stay still and increase your self awareness. Just let your stroke out, for better or worse, and make any adjustments you might want on the next shot.

Once you start smacking the object ball to the back of the pocket and stopping the cue ball with regularity, just keep doing it over and over, really engraining it into your being. You can then ease up on the speed and try draw and follow as well.

Your improvement in those categories will be proportional to the work you put into this drill as well. One beautiful thing about this drill is that it helps tremendously with all areas of your game. The long straight in can be one of your game's best friend.

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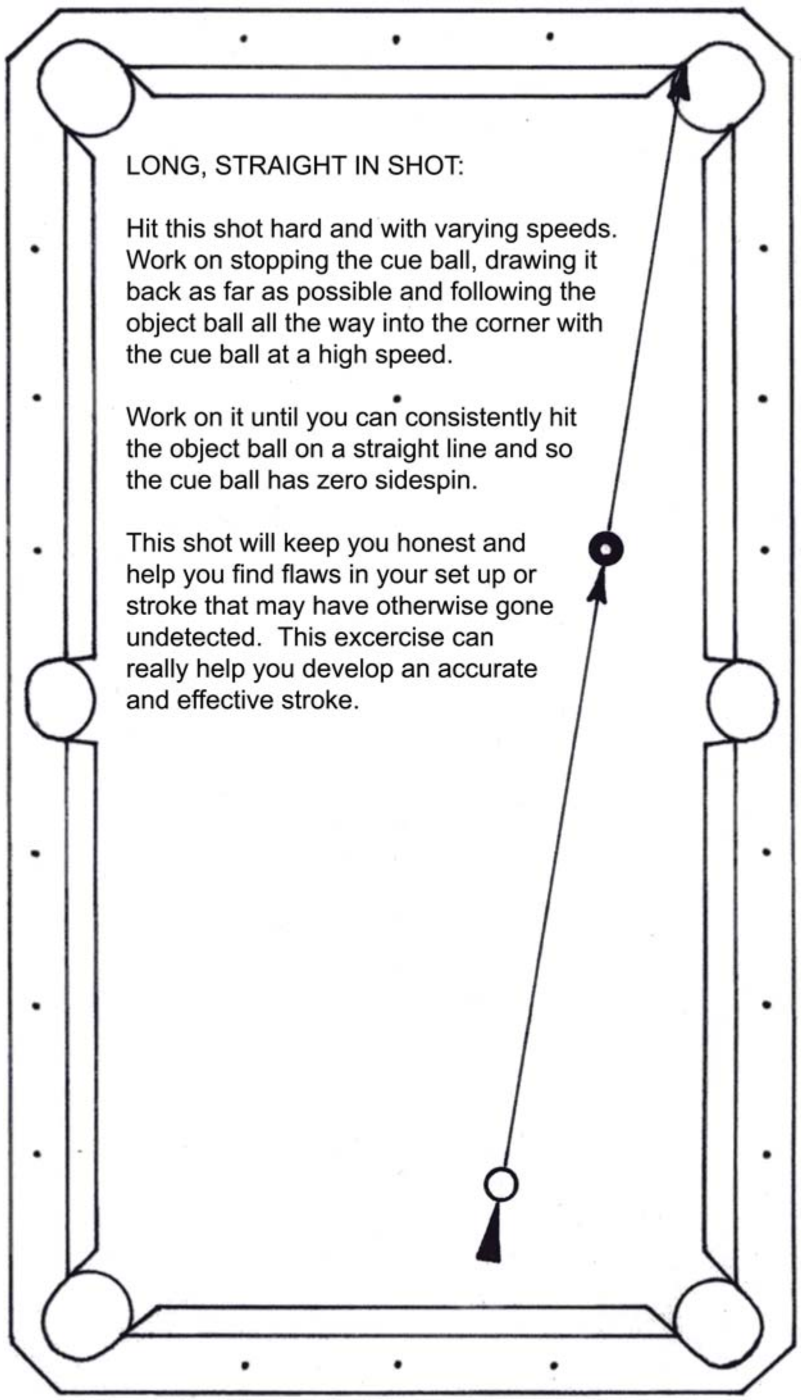

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Automatic Stroke Power Addition

There are many beginners to intermediate players out there who learn to play good pool to a certain level, yet when they really need a little power in their game, they just cannot deliver what is required for the shot. This problem could cause shots that only require a medium or medium hard shot to be out of reach.

In this article I will cover one quick fix that may just be the boost they are looking for. It will seem so basic, yet without detection by a keen eye; a player may never detect this during their entire pool playing life. Let's see if this could be you, and if it is, let me know if you break through an old ceiling on your power game.

When you throw a baseball for distance, how do you begin? You wind up, right? You pull your hand and arm in as far back as a position as you can, and then you begin your accelerating throwing motion that eventually launches the ball. In pool, you begin your stroke with the backswing.

And so the problem I'm talking about here is that many players fail to pull back their cue as far as possible on their backswing when they need power! They will ask me why they cannot draw the ball very far or get much action on the cue ball and when I watch them, I see that they are only pulling their cue back half way before beginning their final stroke forward!

This is like trying to throw a baseball for distance but only starting by holding the ball up by your forehead and then trying to launch it 50 yards.

If this applies to you, try pulling your cue all the way back so that the ferrule is in the closed part of your bridge or on top of your thumb with an open hand bridge. When you pull back all the way like this, it gives you the ability to have more power with less effort.

It gives you the ability to accelerate smoothly, and more time to accelerate so your timing into the cue ball is just right. It will allow you to hit the ball without jabbing at it with a sudden punchy motion. Your stroke will look a lot smoother and it will be easier for you to get a nice long follow through which is also extremely important.

At the back of your backswing, be careful not to drop your grip hand too low. This will cause your tip to have a real downward arcing motion into the cue ball without much follow through and may cause many miscues on draw shots unless your timing is impeccable.

It is much easier to have your hand up a little higher on the end of your back swing so the tip is low on its way into the cue ball and is also on a good plane for a nice long follow through.

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Be sure not to negate your nice back swing by stopping your stroke at the cue ball. Allow the tip to follow through several inches BEYOND the cue ball.

Let this entire motion, from backswing to follow through be one long smooth motion. As the late, great Steve "The Miz" Mizerak said, your stroke stays the same on all shots; it is the intensity that changes.

Professional Player Akiko Kitayama "Leopard Woman"
of Japan demonstrates excellent masse' shot fundamentals.
(Photo courtesy of Akiko Kitayama)

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Build Skill and Confidence

First of all, Congratulations to John Schmidt for running 400 balls in Straight Pool on a 9-foot table earlier this summer! Not 399, not 401, but 400 balls! Wow! John modestly told me he may never break that number, but I think he could beat Mosconi's world record run of 526 balls. Who knows, could he run 1,000? Could you run 1,000?

I think later that same week Schmidt posted another run in the 200's and captured it on video (it recently came out for sale). Both runs had plenty of eyewitnesses by the way, and I know John to be a total class act and definitely skilled enough to accomplish such feats. I've heard stories about how he used to wake up every morning while in Seattle and eat 100 ball runs for breakfast! John is an all around great, as he is a 9-ball and One Pocket Champion as well.

Straight pool is a game that requires tremendous cue ball control, shot making ability, knowledge, strategizing, concentration, rhythm, and a positive attitude. You will be doing yourself a service by learning and trying to improve in this game.

I am now going to give you a game or drill I created for myself when I was a kid that really helped me advance quickly in pool. It is good for players of all skill levels for different reasons. Here it is:

Evenly spread all 15 balls across the table, with a few balls close to the rail but not too many. Then, with cue ball in hand on the first shot, run the balls in any order you choose. When you run out without scratching, set the balls back on the table in a similar fashion and do it again. Keep going until you miss. That constitutes one game or run for you.

The object is to pick a target number you wish to run, and go for it. This is considerably easier than regulation straight pool, but it can present a great challenge and opportunity to build skill and confidence.

For a beginning player, running just one table can be a great accomplishment and milestone. It will require a good understanding of aim and the ability to hit the contact point. Some basic cue ball skill will help, but it is possible to run the table once with excellent pocketing and some lucky positional play with no scratching.

Running two tables with no cue ball control is unlikely. It is just difficult to keep getting lucky. So to run multiple tables, you will need pocketing skills and cue ball skills. It also takes analytical skills for evaluating which shots to shoot.

The more racks you want to run, the more skill you will need. Once clearing the table becomes easy for you, posting high numbers will mainly be a matter of concentration and execution.

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I figured early on that running 100 balls should be routine. But I was learning still and I had to work hard at getting there. The more I played this game the easier it got and so did running 200 and more. It was after this that I switched to playing regular straight pool, but coming back to this drill can be helpful and fun.

The key is to give yourself a target number that sounds like a challenge to you. Once you get that number, you set the bar higher. I forget my record at this game, but how many can you run?

A lot of times you may find your run ended on an easy miss or loss of concentration. Well, that should aggravate you enough to concentrate better on your next try. All the while you will be learning and recognizing patterns on the table and you will be eliminating the errors that caused previous blunders. Your skill will be improving.

This also gives you practice in dealing with the self imposed pressure to reach a target number. Even though the tables are just as easy as in the beginning, you may feel more pressure as you get close to your target number and beyond. Dealing with this will make you tougher under the pressure of competition.

This helps your confidence because once you start regularly clearing the table; your mindset in other games like 8 ball, 9 ball and straight pool will be to run the table! Once you play this game a bit, you will realize just how amazing it is to run 400 balls in regulation straight pool. Way to go John! Keep running!

John Schmidt en route to winning the 2006 US Open
9-Ball Championships in Chesapeake, VA. (Photo
Courtesy of JR Calvert, www.jrcalvert.com)

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Wow Chia-Ching

Chia-Ching Wu of Taiwan. To watch him play 9-ball, you really would not be surprised to see him win the World 9-ball Championship. He's got good form, a straight stroke, steady rhythm, great shot making, excellent cue ball control, smart patterns, poise, an awesome break, and a ton of confidence.

Oh yeah, and he's six-teen years old. Sixteen years old? Are you kidding me? Actually, skilled and talented sixteen year old pool players are not extremely uncommon, but good enough to win the world title? And then if such a kid is good enough, to actually get out there and do it? That's incredible! More than well done kid, you just rewrote the pool history books!

Johnny Archer was the previous youngest world champion at 21, surprise- surprise. And I was impressed to see Thorsten Hohmann win it in 2003 at 24 years of age. But 16 years old, really, you are not kidding me?

Most people are asking me if this kid really plays that good. I'd say yes. I had the thrill of watching him win the tournament in person. It is amazing enough that a 16 year old won, but how he did it was more incredible and has undoubtedly won him countless lifetime fans.

In the race to 17 finals, losing 16-12, he had ball in hand on the 2 ball after the 27 year old Kuo's untimely no-rail foul, and ran that rack to make the score 16-13. Needing to win 4 games in a row, the 16 year old Wu proceeded to break and run precisely 4 racks of 9-ball on pool's greatest stage, in the most urgent of all moments.

To top it off, Wu made the final, hill-hill, championship winning 9-ball…with a mechanical bridge! It was not an easy shot (at least for me) into a small pocket, but he just asked for the bridge, lined it up and shot it in…piece of cake. He raised both his cue and the bridge into the air, screamed with everyone else, smiled ear to ear (he could not wipe it off), and the value of his bobble-head dolls just went way up.

I was up in the press box next to Rico Diks and Corey Deuel during the finals. I think we were more nervous than Wu was. Corey said to me after Wu won, "That was the most amazing thing in pool I've ever seen."

This tops my list too, barely edging out Earl Strickland's brilliant 1-9 combo to run his 10th consecutive rack and $1,000,000 in the 1996 Dallas Million Dollar Challenge.

Wu plays just the kind of 9-ball that is fun to play and fun to watch. Attack, attack, attack… He goes for just about everything, and expects to make everything. After watching him for a while, you expect him to make everything too.

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Top Australian pro David Reljik was telling me, "If he has a weakness it is his safety play, but even that's not bad, his attack game is just incredible." Starting out playing snooker as a kid must have helped his skill and confidence in shot making. He plays good position too, with a soft touch and plenty of power when he needs it.

The thing that impresses me most about Chia-Ching is his confidence. At any age, to play with his confidence is awesome. Even if Efren Reyes did what he did, people would be talking about it forever.

I hope a lot of kids see Wu's victory here in the States. Video game sales may take a hit, with pool cue sales making a big jump. The score: Pool-1, Video Games-0. Come on kids, unplug your mind, get off your #@!&*, and start playing pool! Congratulations Chia-Ching Wu! You're the man!

Chia-Ching Wu: The 2005 WPA World 9-Ball Champion & WPA World 8-Ball Champion. (Photo courtesy of azbilliards.com)

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Wu Proves Worthy

There just are not enough sports writers in pool, so I have to cover the continuing exploits of Taiwan's wonder boy, Chia-Ching Wu. Can you imagine anyone (Efren Reyes and Nick Varner don't count) winning two world titles in less than five months?

Well, Wu has done it again! In November, six-teen year old phenom Chia-Ching Wu won the WPA World 8-Ball Title in Fujairah in the U.A.E.(United Arab Emirates) adding to his already unimaginable victory in July at the World 9-Ball Championships.

I've heard a report that the Taiwanese government gave him a $200,000 bonus for this latest victory to add to the $20,000 first prize. He also doubled his bonus from Knight Shot, one of his sponsors based in the UAE, who supplied the tables for the World 8-ball Championships.

It is great to have a government that values their world champion pool players and rewards them for a job well done. You have to admit, the kid deserves it. He just achieved one of the toughest things in the sports world. Because I had an early exit from the event, all I could do was watch and I was impressed with his 8-Ball game.

I have heard from one source that he had never played 8-Ball before and learned the patterns by watching other players play their matches. Hmmmm, that sounds like a stretch but who knows, his nickname is the "Boy Genius" after all.

It was somewhat of a miracle event for him as he had a few hill-hill matches with the most notable escape coming in the quarter finals when Thorsten Hohmann surprisingly missed an easy 8-Ball at hill-hill. From there Wu took his good omen and then dominated Niels Feijen 10-5 in the semis and Nick Van Den Berg 11-3 in the finals.

Earlier in the tournament I was watching Alex Lely playing some great 8-Ball on Wu with a 7-3 lead when he somehow gave Wu a shot. Wu proceeded to run rack after rack with smart patterns and brilliant shot making as he breezed past Lely to win the match. It seems like the score does not matter to Wu as he will just cruise forward in high gear with calmness, focus and confidence.

A celebrity in Taiwan, he is known for being a nice kid and humble. With his newfound wealth he as bought his Grandmother a house to say thanks for all the hard work in bringing him up.

As great as the IPT may become, Wu is the undisputed Champion of the World for 2005 with his two WPA world titles. I would imagine that the IPT may soon be the biggest tour with the most coveted tournaments.

The WPA has done a great job in getting truly international fields with top talent for their events, yet the prize money has been slow to increase. It will be interesting to see how

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other promoters change their events because of the IPT. Will prize money dramatically increase in other major events because of the higher standards to be set by the IPT?

Hopefully we will see Wu and other top talent get involved with the IPT in the future. Without a doubt, Wu's two WPA World Titles in 2005 are incredible and meaningful, especially with such a deep field of top international talent. Great playing Wu, keep on playing!

Nick Varner, an 8-time World Champion and mental master, contemplates his next move while playing on the IPT Tour. Varner is the only player ever to have won World Titles in five games: Straight Pool, 8-Ball, 9-Ball, Bank Pool, and One-Pocket. Chia-Ching Wu joins an elite group of players who have won both the World 8-Ball and 9-Ball Titles (including Efren Reyes and Earl Strickland), and may be the only player ever to do it in the same year. (Photo courtesy of www.internationalpooltour.com)

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Your Backswing Sets up Your Stroke

So many times, I have written about the importance of knowing the stroking line and setting up your stance based on knowing and seeing this line. Anyone who is playing well has a keen awareness of the stroking line and has a nice balance on this line. So my question now is "how do you keep your cue on this line?"

A common malady among players who approach me for advice is that their cue wobbles side to side while they are taking their practice strokes. Of course the first fix to this is to know the stroking line before your bend into your stance so that your eyes and hands (and cue) are on the line at the moment you arrive in your stance. If you do not take care of this part first, you will miss much more often.

So, once you have tried in earnest from the get go to get your eyes and cue on the stroking line *before* and as you complete your form, you now need a way or ways to keep them there in your warm up strokes and during your all important actual stroke.

This takes work, trust, talent, and or years of practice. That's ok, that is what keeps a pool player's blood pumping. All of that is as natural to improving as breathing is to living. It is best if you enjoy every breath and every step on your road to pool mastery as well.

I like to draw comparisons between pool and archery. One of the top books I recommend to my pool students is Zen in the Art of Archery by Eugen Herrigel.

I have also had the fortune to talk with a champion Archer in California while at a party a couple years ago. He explained to me how he sets up his shots, and I was amazed at how similar the process was to a champion cueist's setup. First he set his feet. Next he drew the bow with it pointed to the ground slightly. Then with the bow already drawn and his head in place, he lifted up by bending his waist with his eyes on the target and pointed his arrow at the target. Wow! So similar to effective pool technique!

Pool is more than hand eye coordination; it is *hands* eye coordination (and actually body eye coordination). Both of your hands need to coordinate to what you are looking at. Hopefully you do an excellent job of placing and keeping your bridge hand where it needs to be. Your grip hand is slightly more complicated to say the least as it will be in almost constant motion.

Try to keep that motion on the stroking line, not just on your forward stroke, but also on your back swing. Just imagine how much easier it will be to begin moving your cue forward on a line if you begin that motion precisely on the line you want it to travel down.

Instead of having your stroke find the straight line after it begins moving, why not have it start moving forward from a point that is already on the line? So, I want you to try

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concentrating extra hard on pulling your backswing back perfectly on the stroking line and see how this affects the ease with which you are able to stroke forward on a straight line. Even experiment with pausing at the end of your back swing, making sure that the back of your cue is on the stroking line.

As you pull back, have your eyes forward either on the spot on the cue ball you want to hit, the ghost ball, the contact point or just on the stroking line. As long as you concentrate with extra effort on keeping your backswing on the stroking line, stroking forward with accuracy will seem to come with more ease.

Eventually this will become second nature and the wobble in your stroke, if there is any, should diminish or disappear depending on the work and body awareness you apply to what you are doing. Make it a relaxed yet focused effort and have confidence that you will improve.

A good shot of the backswing while working out at my Uncle Dave Eberle's house in Dover, Ohio. The table is a Brunswick Commander, almost 100 years old. My Father Rob talked the YMCA into selling it to him with the balls, 15 cues, and cue rack for $100 when he was 16, claiming it brought the "wrong element" into the place. My Grandfather Charles (Pop) Eberle tore down a wall in the basement of the old house in Dover to make room for the table. My Grandfather was a consistent hundred ball runner in straight pool. My Dad got good enough to run 75 balls in straight pool and 5 racks of 9-Ball. Dave can run out and is still improving, his son Dan is a hot shot pool player, and Dan's son Joey (now only 10) loves the game and shows lots of promise. My older and younger brothers respectively Stephen and Will can hold their own on the table when not making great music. My Cousin Ed Hardesty is a former Sarasota County Champion, and my cousin Matthew Hardesty can play some pool and is awesome at golf. The Women in my family are scholars, businesswomen, artists, or musicians, and so sweet for allowing all of us guys to play so much pool! (Photo courtesy of Dave Eberle)

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Breaking the Body Movement Barrier

Across pool tables everywhere, people carefully line up on their shots, slowly and deliberately measuring up through a series of practice strokes, only to lurch forward and upward at the precise moment when the cue ball is struck, as if jarred by a massive bolt of electricity.

Players who jump up and there are many who do (to varying degrees), are often baffled and discouraged by their lack of consistency. Perhaps this tendency is motivated by a subconscious intention to “help” the ball into the pocket, but in reality it is the perpetrator of such bad form that requires help.

Quite simply, with the exception of the break shot, one’s body should be completely still throughout the warm-up and delivery of a shot while allowing the shooting arm to perform all the work.

Even at the professional level, a high percentage of missed shots are accompanied by sudden body movement (SBM) at the point of delivery. SBM may be nothing more than theatrical response to the “surprise of missing” – a reflex that captures the hope of making a shot and the reality of missing it.

But in most cases, SBM is as much the cause of a misguided cue ball as it is the effect. Let us then examine the reason for SBM and what can be done to minimize its damaging consequences.

Be prepared. This principle harkens back to a previous article (page 50) where I discussed the importance of lining up on a shot and shooting only when ready. SBM is often the manifestation of an attempt to correct one’s aim at the last second. This can be avoided through a disciplined effort to refrain from “pulling the trigger” until comfort and certainty is achieved.

Take it easy. Optimum performance in pool can only be achieved when relaxed. Tense muscles operate adversely to a smooth stroke. This is particularly true when a muscle spasm triggers a SBM at the moment of delivery. Alternately expanding and contracting your muscles is an effective relaxation technique.

Breathing exercises, stretching, and regular visits to a masseuse are also beneficial. For the true devotee, transcendental meditation is an excellent vehicle for mental and spiritual relaxation.

Keep the faith. Anxiety, doubt and fear can cause one to jump up on key shots in high pressure situations. The higher the stakes, the harder it is to regulate these feelings. Once again, breathe deeply, attempt to divorce yourself from the outcome of a shot, lose your self image while playing (become the shot), have faith, pray, smile, and channel any hindering emotions into positive body language and concentration.

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Take your time. Have you ever missed a ball because you were on your way to the next shot in mid stroke? Whoa Nelly! Settle down and see each shot through to its conclusion.

Form good habits. While a handful of excellent players exhibit slight SBM regularly, it is usually only a small movement that does not interfere with their stroke too much. Many more players fail to realize their potential because of this tendency and not keeping in control.

Of course I recommend not moving at all. Save the theatrics for mime class and build the good habit of *Staying Down On Every Shot and Only Moving Your Arm*. One helpful practice exercise involves staying down and frozen until the cue ball comes to a complete stop.

In game situations, make a habit of staying down until the object ball falls into the pocket. Ask your sparring partner to alert you to SBM, as habits are partially unconscious by definition.

The discipline of keeping your body still on every shot will improve your shot making, accuracy, cue ball control, length of inning, and ultimately the enjoyment you derive from the game.

Here is your author staying still on a shot. Notice that my right arm, cue, and cue ball are the only moving objects…nothing else. (Photo courtesy of Charles Pinkett)

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Are You Ready?

Mike Sigel once said he never shot until he was ready, and back in his heyday, he did very little missing. Once at the U.S. Open 9-Ball, he told me and Charlie Williams "Back then I didn't miss." All he had to do was show up at a tournament in order to win. Possibly a slight exaggeration from Mike "The Mouth," but based on his record, not too far from the truth.

Have you ever stroked a shot even though you knew or felt you were not aiming correctly? Only to exclaim "I knew I was going to miss that!" in an attempt to justify your result? It may be true that every pool player who has ever missed has experienced this feeling at one time or another.

Conversely, it may also be true that every pool player who has ever made a ball has had the feeling of knowing that a particular ball was going into the pocket.

If you are going about the business of pocketing balls and running out, it would be to your advantage to eliminate the feelings that you will miss a shot. Doing this requires a respectable amount of patience and discipline, especially in regards to those moments of uncertainty.

In the past, I have dealt with this situation by shooting anyway because I just couldn't wait. I was in a hurry to make the ball and run the table. Upon missing such a shot, I would feel thoroughly betrayed and disgusted.

One can only take so much pain before the change response takes effect, and with experience and maturity I have learned to stand up and start over in those rare occasions when my aim does not feel correct. This takes a good deal of patience, of which I would always like to remember.

While it takes patience to stand up if the shot does not feel right, it takes discipline to minimize those uncertain moments. Discipline in terms of a pre-shot routine including; clarity of your intended outcome, positive body language, finding the aiming point, body positioning, warm up strokes and eye movement routine, and keeping your body still upon delivery of your actual stroke.

By having a pre-shot routine or SOP (Standard Operating Procedure), your feelings of knowing a ball will drop will increase, and you will be more equipped to create rhythm and run out consistently.

If, after all this you still aren't ready, either stand up or take some extra strokes without over doing it, until your shot is "on." Figure out a formula that works for you. How good would you be if you only shot when you were ready?

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The Landing Strip

If you were about to walk a tight wire across a thousand-foot deep ravine, would you step onto the wire from the side or from straight on? Personally, I would want to be looking straight down the wire before stepping onto it. I would not step onto the wire from the side, and then while I am wobbling onto it, try to find the line and my balance.

Or let's say you are a pilot trying to land a jumbo jet. Would you touch down on the runway at a slight angle and then try to turn the plane straight once the wheels were down? I didn't think so.

You would approach the runway perfectly straight while in the air and just try to hold that straight line on the landing.

In pool, the stroking line is your tight wire or landing strip. Pretend you are a pilot and that you must find this line while you are standing, just before you get into your stance.

Now, once your eyes are on the line, keep them there, *all the way* into your stance. You are coming in for a landing on the stroking line, and once you are down, your stance will be correctly balanced for a smooth delivery.

Or, while you are standing, pretend you are about to walk the tight rope and that you want to be looking directly down the wire before and as you take your first step. A solid pool stance is built around the stroking line, so it is necessary to first see this line and keep it in your sights while you line up.

The purpose of imagining a "ghost cue ball," is to help you find the stroking line. The ghost cue ball is located where the real cue ball will be at the moment of contact with the object ball you are trying to pocket.

With a center ball hit (anywhere on the cue ball's vertical axis), the stroking line runs right down the center of the real cue ball and the ghost cue ball. Whatever trick you can conceive of to accurately find this line will work.

My preference is to find the spot on the table where the ghost ball is resting and use that as the end of my "landing strip." The spot I use is about the size of a small pea. This spot is also on the line of centers (it basically is the center of the ghost cue ball, just dropped down to the table) between the ghost cue ball and the object ball that leads to a specific part of the pocket.

So my first step is actually to find what spot in the pocket I want the object ball to enter and then extend a line from there through the center of the object ball and out the other side. Now I know my spot will intersect this line, and all I have to do is make sure it is one ball's radius (1 and 1/8 inches) from the edge of the object ball.

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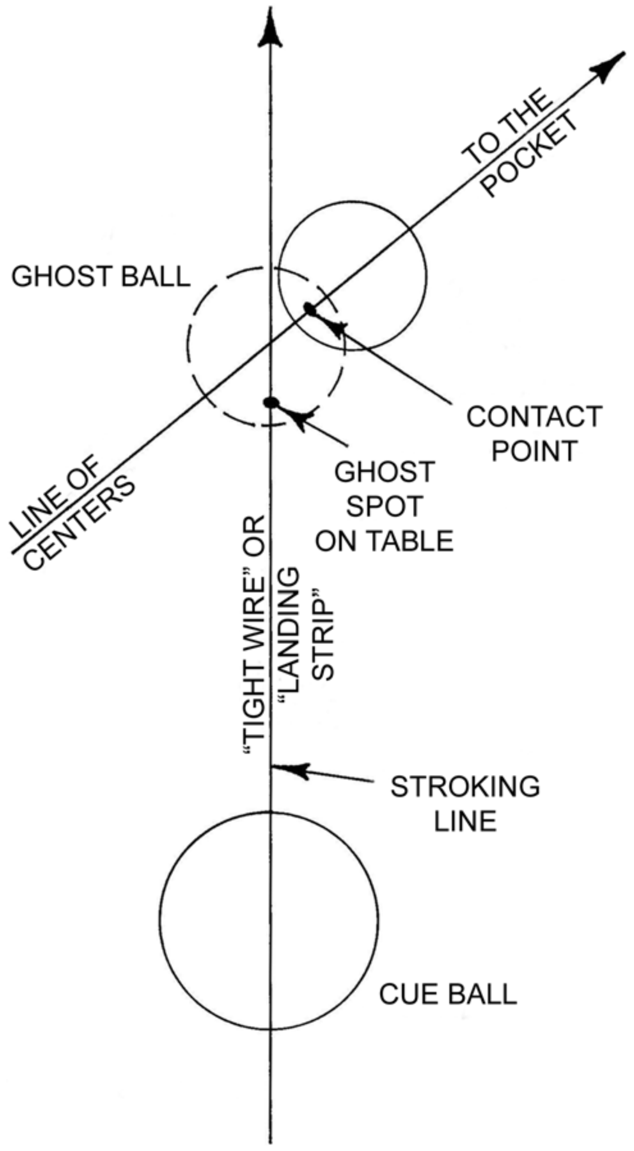
Once I have this spot, I know where the runway is and that it is time to come in for a landing into my stance. Once I am locked into my stance, I stop looking at the spot on the table and only look at the actual contact point on the object ball.

Now, even though the contact point is not on the stroking line, my stroke is in place, and with muscle memory and feel, I can send the cue ball down the tight wire to the target.

Although very strange at first, it is also possible to look at the cue ball last and in essence this is looking down the stroking line. Enjoy the process of finding what works best for you.



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Slice and Dice

The ability to make thin cut shots down the rail will win you many games and matches. You have got to be able to pocket the ball and also, just as important, control the cue ball. You never want to just go for the cut and not plan your cue ball destination.

That would go against one of the first things my Grandfather taught me, "Never turn the cue ball loose." The good news is that with a center ball hit, or just slightly above center, you can contain the cue ball quite nicely in between the rails.

First, we will discuss making the cut. For one, the margin for error is small because small changes in the line of aim cause more deviation from the contact point when compared to a straighter shot. Keeping that in mind will help you concentrate and be disciplined in your approach.

The ability to stroke straight and hit center ball will really help you slice a ball thin. The first key, as in all shot making, is to set up carefully on the stroking line. On a thin cut, the stroking line will not pass through the object ball and if you are not familiar with this shot, it will almost seem like you are aiming to miss the ball.

If you are cutting the ball to the right, look on the cloth to the left of the object ball and find the spot on the table where you think the cue ball will be resting at the moment it contacts the object ball (Spot A). This is your aiming point; now keep your eyes on that spot as you set up your cue and your stance on the line between that spot and center ball.

Once you get in your stance, double check during your practice strokes to see that you are actually aiming on that line. Once you are confident with the line, you can go ahead and deliver the stroke *on that line.*

I like to look at the contact point at the edge of the ball when I pull the trigger, but because this point is not on or near the stroking line, I still focus my feel on stroking straight on the stroking line. It is important to trust your stroke and deliver it as relaxed and smooth as possible.

You could experiment with just looking at the spot when you stroke. That will get you used to stroking towards a point clear off the edge of the ball. If the object ball is near the rail, I like to extend the tangent line of the cue ball beyond the table to some target in the room even with the cloth (Spot B). I know that if I can carom the cue ball straight towards that target, the object ball will go in the pocket.

It is a handy skill to make the cue ball travel straight across the table back and forth once it slices in the object ball. This becomes easier once you hit the object ball parallel to the rail because that will make your tangent line perpendicular to the rail, giving you a natural back and forth direction. Often, somewhere along that line will give you good position for the next shot.

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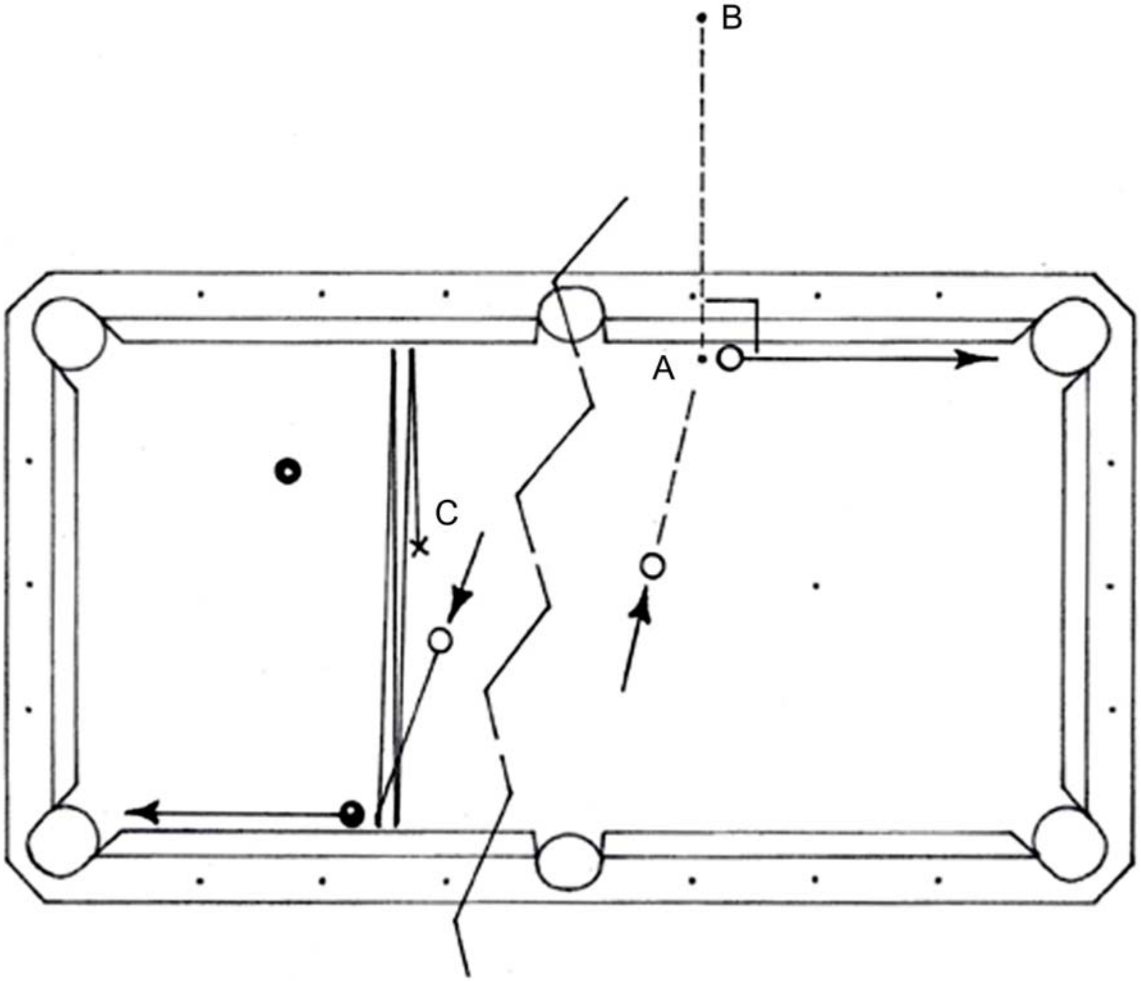
It is just a matter of controlling the speed after first picking exactly how many times you want to cross the table and the exact spot on which to stop for position. I actually count how many times I want it to cross the table and pick the exact spot (Spot C). You have got to go through in your mind the path of the cue ball and how fast it is moving initially and how long it will take to decelerate.

I gave the cue ball line a slight angle in the diagram so you can see how many times it crosses the table. Once you get confident with making the cut, controlling the speed also gets easier.

Cut shots are a nice alternative to banks because if you just hit the ball in the right direction it will usually go in the pocket almost regardless of how hard you hit the cue ball. Bank shots are much more sensitive to speed and spin from the cue ball.

Working on really thin cuts in practice will give you a whole new set of options to choose from during your matches. Remember to relax and be smooth down the stroking line at all cue ball speeds.



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Power Break

Forget the soft break for now, this month I have a couple tips for you to help you break with more accuracy and power. Since you will be hitting the balls hard, your stance needs to be more stable than ever.

So often overlooked is the bridge hand, which is a third of the tripod formed also by your feet. Breaking from the rail is good not only because the angle of approach on the one is conducive to pocketing balls, you can also get really solid with your hand on the rail.

I do this by planting the heel of my hand (palm) onto the table as well as my fingers. This really allows me to put my weight into my arm and table which makes my tripod really solid and solid is good, good, good.

One key is to keep the weight into your palm even on your backswing. You don't want to sway backwards with your backswing and ease up on the pressure into the table with your bridge hand. So especially with your last backswing, lean forward into your bridge hand as you pull the cue back.

When you start your swing into and through the cue ball, your hand will already be snugly in place allowing you to exert your sledgehammer break into the stack.

After you contact the cue ball it is OK to take your hand off the table in classic Johnny Archer style, but not before. Or just leave your hand there and follow through like Earl Strickland.

When breaking from the bed of the table, you also want your bridge palm planted snugly into the table with some more of your body weight than usual. You can even turn your hand more sideways and clump your fingers together to make a more solid bridge.

Another thing I like to do is look at the cue ball during my actual break stroke. Because really, you need to hit the cue ball really hard, not the rack. So I concentrate on lining up accurately and getting balanced in my set up and warm up strokes, and once I think I'm on line and solid enough, I'll look at the cue ball and send it.

I also like to bring my front foot closer to the stroking line when I break. This allows me to shift my weight forward and keep my balance at the same time.

See if any of these recommendations add power and accuracy to your break.

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Keeping a lead

As important as I know it is to bear down until the end of the match, even when I have a big lead, sometimes it takes a painful loss to remind me that it is not over till its over baby. At the UPA Tour stop in Pittsburg, PA., I had a comfortable 8-2 lead in a race to 11 over Mike Davis on the one loss side with the winner advancing to the final eight players.

Mike was not playing his game and I seemed to be coasting along to a win. Mike, being the great player he is, kept coming at me and made some really good jump shots along the way. But even if he started playing perfect the odds were against him as it was alternate break and I would be guaranteed at least a few more chances.

I started watching the other 3 matches in that round and seemed to drop my guard a bit on one key shot on the 3 ball that I had to elevate my cue for and missed. I should have taken a bit more time and given a better effort.

Then, on my first chance to win the set on the hill, I was down on a shot when a strand of hair fell in my eye bothering me and I stayed down anyway and missed the ball. Mike ran out. I should have stood up and moved the hair out of my eyes and now I was mad at myself for being so attached to shooting at that moment.

I had another chance on the hill and miscued on a long draw shot, making the ball but ending up short on position. Mike won that game. At hill-hill Mike barely missed a tough shot on the one ball but slopped the 7 in and ran out, winning the set.

He did what he needed to do, forgot the past and played hard, and I lost just enough focus to allow him the needed opportunities to win the set.

Usually, if I have a huge lead, I play even harder because I know just how possible comebacks are, especially against a great player. Also, as many times as I have come from behind to win I am usually on guard against that happening to me. It might help to pretend that you are losing when you do have that big lead.

It had been a long time since I had blown a big lead and now that this happened I will not forget the lesson for a long time - and hopefully never! Congratulations to Mike Davis for staying in there and on winning his next two matches over two great players Jeremy Jones and Johnny Archer and for coming in fourth after a tough Charlie Williams finally put him out.

Also congratulations to Shawn Putnam for winning the Pittsburg UPA Tour stop! It is Shawn's well deserved first major win and puts him at number one on tour for the new calendar year 2005! Remember, its not over till the last ball drops! Stay focused on playing good pool until the end.

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Taking Inventory

In many past articles, I've focused the fundamental mechanics of playing solid pool. Much of the information I have given has been in the shape of principles as they relate to alignment, aiming, stroke and mental effectiveness.

Hopefully some of the ideas, tips and "secrets" I have given you have provided benefit to your game.

The fact that we are all a little different in form and ability, and the fact that there are players who have success with many different styles proves that there is no ONE way of playing pool right.

However, tried and true fundamentals hold up over time and under pressure and one can often find benefit in working to make their own technique simpler, more effective, and to the point.

Usually, the proof is in the pudding. The litmus test of your game is in your results; the ability that you can consistently display and in the high points you can reach. Your low points or slumps are useful in showing you what could use improvement in your game.

So in this article, I will not teach you a new tip or secret, rather I will give you a list of questions for you to ask yourself that could help you assess the current state of your game and help push you in the right direction to make intelligent improvements.

I'm sure you have heard that it can often be the questions we ask ourselves that help take us to the next level in anything we do. So I've created a list of questions for you that relate to different aspects of your pool game. If you cannot answer these questions off the top of your mind, just go to the table and find out the answers.

Maybe you will find that you are a pool virtuoso or what you might need to improve on your path to becoming one. Challenge one of your pool room friends with these questions if you want. You can also add to this list of questions to further increase your awareness of yourself and your relation to the many aspects of this game we call pool.

AIM

1. Can you find the contact point?
2. Can you find the aiming (stroking) line?
3. Can you set up your stance and stroke on the aim line?
4. Can you adjust your aim accurately for throw and deflection?

ROTATION (Spin)

1. Can you judge the correct amount of spin to get the cue ball going in the direction you want off of object balls, rails, or the flat bed of the table such as a curve shot?
2. Can you deliver the cue tip to the chosen spot on the cue ball?

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3. Can you apply the spin effectively with your stroke?

FORCE (Speed)

1. Are you choosing a destination for the cue ball before you set your stance?
2. Can you judge your needed speed?
3. Can you execute the speed you have chosen?
4. Can you adjust to new equipment and changing playing conditions?

STROKE

1. Can you deliver your cue (stroke) on the aim line?
2. Can you hit the cue ball with no side spin?
3. Do you follow through?
4. Are you smooth?

FUNDAMENTALS

1. Do your mechanics get the job done?
2. Does your body interfere with your stoke on your follow through?
3. Are you in control of your body or do you jump up during your stroke?
4. Are your bridges solid?

STRATEGY

1. Do you plan your whole run out in advance?
2. Do you precisely plan your cue ball and object ball paths?
3. Do you always think at least 2 balls ahead of your current shot?
4. Do you know many different ways to achieve position from a single shot?

MENTAL GAME

1. Do you have positive self talk?
2. Do you play with confidence?
3. Do you always try 100% no matter what the score is?
4. Do you get down on yourself when you are playing bad or just keep trying hard until you get your game back?
5. Do you put yourself in tough matches to expand your comfort zone?

HEALTH

1. Do you feel good?
2. Do you eat lots of healthy foods including raw fruits and vegetables?
3. Do you exercise regularly?
4. Do you avoid bad health habits?
5. Are you willing to make healthy lifestyle changes?

Well, I hope you can find some of these questions useful on your path to self improvement in your pool game and also in life. Stay focused, enjoy the game, and keep making the next ball and playing position!

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For Future Reference

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I have also been using many of Freelife's cutting-edge nutritional and personal care products and I definitely have experienced a positive difference in the way I feel, and that is priceless!"

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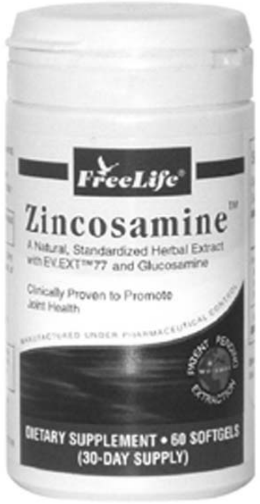

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About the Author

Max Eberle was born in Dover, Ohio in 1972 and taught to play pool by his legendary pool playing Grandfather Charles Eberle. With the encouragement of his Father Robert, at twelve years of age Max decided he would go pro one day.

Max went on to win the National Junior Championships, back-to-back National Collegiate Championships, and recently was a semi-finalist at the 2006 WPA World Straight Pool Championships with high runs of 114 and 127-and-out in the quarter finals.

Ranked in the top 5 on the US Pro Circuit in 2003 and 2004, Max has won numerous regional Pro events and has beaten most of the top players and world champions of today.

Max Eberle was voted the 2003 Pro Tour Sportsman of the Year and has played in events extensively throughout the US, Europe and Asia. He has given entertaining and educational exhibitions to many audiences and has given free clinics and equipment to the children at the Boys and Girls Club and the Sunrise Retirement Home.

Eberle is on call in Hollywood where he resides, performing and providing technical assistance with movies and commercials including a Hanes Commercial starring Michael

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Jordan. Visit www.maxeberle.com to see Max's huge portrait of Jordan which he completed two years prior to meeting Michael on the set of the Hanes commercial in Los Angeles.

Having taught pool for over fifteen years now, Max gives private lessons to pool enthusiasts and major celebrities at their home or at Hollywood Billiards where he is the House Pro. He has been an instructional columnist for several publications, most notably Inside Pool Magazine.

Max's high runs on a 9-foot table are 10 consecutive break and runs in 9-Ball, 15 balls in One-Pocket, and 158 balls in straight pool.

Max Eberle has also been an artist since an early age. With the encouragement of his Mother Estelle, Max started his formal art training at 5 years of age and has since won several awards and had numerous showings.

Now focusing on large scale paintings, Max has experience in drawing, drafting, graphic design, logo design, and architectural design. Max artistic interests also include writing poetry, songs, and creating music

"The Dancer" Acrylic on Canvas. In the Private collection of Francine Massey, the very charming wife of BCA Hall of Fame Pool Player, Mike Massey.

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PRAISE FOR MAX EBERLE

"Max has developed a vast knowledge of pocket-billiards that not only works in theory, but on the table where it really counts. Learning his techniques will help players from the beginner all the way up to the more advanced player."

- CJ WILEY (ESPN Ultimate 9-Ball Champion)

"Max's uncanny perspective to analyze and perfect flaws in your playing will undoubtedly improve your game; his unique instructional style goes far beyond other pool methods and books in your relentless drive for perfection."

- WILL SOPER (Longtime student of the game)

"Eberle has the magical kind of game that announces, in the space of no more than 3 shots, everything you want to see in a player (assuming your betting on him) poise, fluidity, rhythm, solidness. He looks like he can play with anyone."

- GEORGE FELS (Author of the book Mastering Pool)

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